

Subordination at Work

Chinese Female Domestic Workers' Struggles between Silence and Critical Consciousness

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DECLARATION

I, Mei-Ling Ellerman, declare that this thesis is my original work, except where due acknowledgment has been made.

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ABSTRACT

Within China's migrant underclass, millions of rural women struggle to earn a living through low-status, feminized, domestic work. While caretaking, cleaning, and cooking in urban homes, female migrant domestic workers often experience subordination including discrimination, poor and unjust treatment, and exploitation. Most workers comply in the face of subordination rather than openly resisting or negotiating for change. Although many have expressed feelings of anger and dehumanization, they often feel powerless to improve their situations, and cannot expect effective legal or civil protection in the near future. I seek to support potential change at the grassroots through my study of the broad range of factors that influences domestic workers' responses to subordination. My analysis, which employs critical ethnography and feminist research approaches, draws upon my qualitative semi-structured interviews, focus and discussion groups, life-history interviews and participant observation in Beijing. A small number of my informants have consistently advocated for themselves, so I compare the cases of those who remain silent with those of workers who have attained "critical consciousness," that is, who act upon their growing socio-political consciousness about the oppressive structures and relations that bind people like them and that contribute to their subjugation.

It is not sufficient to attribute domestic workers' silent compliance to their lack of social and economic power in the workplace. Instead, I have developed an interdisciplinary analytical approach that explores a wide range of socio-cultural, socio-political and psychological factors, which influence how domestic workers understand and address their subordination. These factors are integral to the formation and practice of domestic workers' identities, morality and values, and responsibilities and understandings about power. Collectively, these in turn tend to discourage workers from acting against the norm and advocating for themselves. I also draw from theoretical discussions of gender, the mechanisms of power, social cognition, critical consciousness, and the moral process. This dissertation has departed from the literature on Chinese migrant workers and domestics in its contribution toward bottom-up change, and its multi-level approach which examines social, cultural and political forces that define and limit how workers can act; the involvement of their gender, work and ethical identities; the psychological and cognitive impact of subordination; and the role of workers' individualized moralities, motives and consciousness.

Through my interdisciplinary approach, I demonstrate the silencing influence of their gendered life-histories, socio-cultural pressures, Chinese ethical discourses, and non-transformative forms of identity. I show how subordinating power can silence workers and elicit compliance, and how its psychological toll perpetuates their lack of voice. I also illustrate how domestic workers with voice have reached the point of self-advocacy. Despite sharing a similar background and work with silenced workers, these women possess critical differences regarding their self-identities, perceived ability to effect change, moral priorities, perspectives on power relations and socio-political consciousness. The explanations of how and why people resist subordination and act to reclaim personal power and dignity offer hope that, even without intervention, many of those subjected to multiple forms of oppression will no longer remain silent.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1	Introduction: Investigating the Subordination of Domestic Workers And their Responses.....	1
Chapter 2	Gender, Rural Lives, Domestic Work and Identity.....	28
Chapter 3	Power, Subordination, and Socio-Political Consciousness.....	59
Chapter 4	Shaping Oneself Ethically in the Chinese Context.....	101
Chapter 5	Exploring Workers' Moral Practice and Responses to Immorality.....	135
Chapter 6	Workers' Actions from Silence to Voice.....	165
Chapter 7	Conclusion.....	209
Appendix I	List of Informants.....	226
Glossary.....		229
Bibliography.....		231

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: INVESTIGATING DOMESTIC WORKERS' SUBORDINATION AND THEIR RESPONSES

Most [employers] are not good; we can only tolerate [our situation]. There are also good people, but a small percentage. Many workers can only endure the wrongs in their employer's home, and they can only cry to themselves (Wei Lin, 42, live-in and hourly domestic worker, Beijing, 2009).

I can deal with most problems, for example, when others (clients) don't want to pay you. There are people who are afraid that you will eat with them, well I mention that I will eat with them instead (of being paid). I intentionally frighten them...and in the end they wanted to pay me (Han, 30, hourly domestic worker, Beijing, 2009).

This dissertation explores the commonplace subordination of one of urban China's most marginalized, low-status, and least visible groups, Chinese female migrant domestic workers.¹ I seek to answer the following two research questions which address how domestic workers are subordinated, how they are affected by experiences of subordination, and why they respond as they do: How do socio-cultural, socio-political and psychological factors influence how Chinese female domestic workers understand and address subordination? And, why do a small minority of migrant domestic workers advocate for themselves in these situations, whereas the majority do not?

This thesis makes an original contribution to anthropological and sociological scholarship on Chinese migrants and female domestic workers, and studies of power and morality. It does so by means of an interdisciplinary approach to theorizing the dynamics of subordination and the underlying reasons for domestic workers' responses. I address the ways in which gendered social-cultural norms and identities as well as subordinating power itself work to elicit compliance, usually without the workers' full cognizance. However, I argue that it is also necessary to look beyond the effects of these workers' low-status gendered roles, and consider the importance of their ethical

¹ Subordination ranges from unjust and poor treatment to discrimination and exploitation. Although not all the informants I interviewed have been subordinated, the majority have experienced varying degrees of subordination. I explore many forms of subordination in the workplace, as well as those to which the women are subjected in their private lives. The latter forms include situations in which the women's parents, husbands or relatives control, deprive, discriminate against, and make decisions for them which are not in their interests or which are made against their will. These women may be treated poorly or exploited because of their gender, rurality, and lack of resources, education and power.

values, motivations, perceptions of self-efficacy, and socio-political consciousness. These characteristics vary depending on the worker, as well as how her particular life experiences and learning can impact how she sees herself and thinks she should act towards others. I discuss the negative psychological effects of subordination, but then demonstrate its connection to socio-political consciousness, which can potentially develop into a foundation for resistance and self-advocacy. I show how these diverse factors ultimately influence the silence of the majority, and facilitate the self-advocacy of the few.

INTRODUCTION

My fieldwork researching Chinese female migrant domestic workers' subordination was conducted in Beijing, which has the second largest population of domestic workers after Shenzhen,² and where domestic work is a leading choice for rural women who lack formal skills and education. The majority of domestic workers in Beijing have migrated from rural areas, such as in Hebei, Henan, Gansu, Sichuan, Shanxi, Anhui and Shandong.³ Out of China's vast population of over 160 million rural migrant workers, approximately 20 million work as nannies, caretakers, cleaners and cooks in private households. There are approximately 367,000 domestic workers in Beijing alone, most of whom are women.⁴ Domestic workers, like many migrants working in the urban economy, contend with violation of their human rights and widespread discrimination. They lack social and legal protection, as well as access to governmental, non-governmental (NGO) or community-level channels for help.⁵ Domestic workers are more vulnerable to exploitation and mistreatment than other migrant workers, such as factory workers, because domestics are isolated within their workplaces, and nearly all

² ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, "Situational Analysis of Domestic Work in China," (2009), 2.

³ Mei-Ling Ellerman, "Notes from Interviews with Housekeeping Agency Staff," (2008).

⁴ Li Dajing, Ed., *Gongtong Yingzao Hexie de Jiazheng Fenwei* (Building Together a Harmonious Climate for Housekeeping), (2011), <http://old.nongjianv.org/web/pdf/dgm/201201dgmtx-jztk.pdf>; ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, "Situational Analysis of Domestic Work in China," 2; ILO, "Fact Sheet: Domestic Workers in China," (2009), http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@asia/@ro-bangkok/documents/publication/wcms_114256.pdf; Xinhua, "China's 'Floating Population' Exceeds 221 million," March 1, 2011. Li Dajing cited 367,000 jobs in the domestic work industry in Beijing, a number which may include housekeeping agency staff, as well as domestic workers. This number is likely higher now.

⁵ Workers can call the police, but very few workers would consider doing so. It is uncertain whether the police would or could help them. For example, if there is no proof that a worker has worked a certain number of hours or that she has been mistreated, and her employer denies the allegations, then the police may not be able to help, even if they wanted to.

lack protection under the Labor Law. Many factory workers suffer from rights violations and receive inadequate support from their labor unions or the government, but they possess a legal footing since their labor relationship is legally recognized, and they have the capacity to organize with their co-workers.⁶ These workers can obtain legal or organizing advice from labor NGOs, enter into labor arbitration, or may resort to informal bargaining, protest or even violence.⁷

The domestic worker-employer labor relationship is not legally recognized, except when workers are directly hired by labor dispatch agencies and then dispatched to employers. These contracts fall within the provisions of the Labor Contract Law. However, the vast majority of domestic workers' agencies are intermediary agencies, and given the recent amendments to the Labor Contract Law, labor dispatch agencies have even less incentive to work with domestics.⁸ Even if the intermediary agencies made the unlikely conversion to labor dispatch agencies, there would probably be little improvement in the oversight and protection of workers.⁹ Labor dispatch agencies are not known to have a much higher standard of protection than intermediary agencies, "labor dispatching has been abused by many Chinese companies as a means of avoiding the employer's responsibilities under the labor relationship created by labor contracts."

¹⁰ There are also very few cases where domestic workers have organized or used the law. Xinying Hu, who writes about Chinese domestic workers, mentioned two trade unions. The Beijing community-based trade union was founded by a former trade union official and has focused on recreational activities and "knowledge training" such as service skills, health and legal information rather than directly supporting labor rights. The Xi'an union was founded in 2004 for mostly laid-off workers from state-owned

⁶ Chris King-chi Chan, "Community-based Organizations for Migrant Workers' Rights: The Emergence of Labour NGOs in China," *Community Development Journal* 48, no. 1 (2013); Jeffrey Becker, "The Knowledge to Act: Chinese Migrant Labor Protests in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Political Studies* 44, no. 11 (2012).

⁷ ———, "The Knowledge to Act." Migrant organizing and protests are on the rise despite the fact that protests are discouraged and workers are not permitted to independently form collective bargaining organizations.

⁸ Grace Chen, and Catherine Zhai, "Draft Rules on Labour Dispatch Arrangements in China," Lexology, Accessed on August 14, 2013, <http://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=ae1099b1-417b-45f1-bd96-06a69540b924>. Labor dispatch entities must now sign at least a two-year contract with workers, which given the assumed "low quality" of rural domestic workers, makes it unlikely agencies would take the financial risk of hiring possibly unreliable workers for a long period of time.

⁹ Lee & Xu Lehman, "New Changes Regarding Labour Dispatch Rules in China," Accessed on March 11, 2013, <http://www.lehmanlaw.com/resource-centre/faqs/employment/new-changes-regarding-labour-dispatch-rules-in-china.html>.

¹⁰ David Huang, "New Labor Contract Law Affects Employment Arrangements of Foreign Invested Enterprises in China," Accessed on August 14, 2013, http://www.dorsey.com/eu_China_Labor_Contract_Law_062413/.

enterprises. It has a small membership, and helps workers with financial and labor issues. Neither can collectively bargain with employers, because if their members are not covered by the Labor Law, then the unions have no legal basis for bargaining.¹¹ Also given that many of other migrant workers' employers violate the Labor and Contract Laws, and that even these workers in legally recognized labor relations seldom attain justice, unless the government shifts its position on refusing to regulate employer-worker relations in the private sphere and improves enforcement of the laws, domestic workers cannot expect any significant increase in rights protection in the near future. Hence, I am focused on how domestic workers themselves act in response to subordination, and their potential for self-advocacy.

The findings from a previous 2005-2007 research project that I carried out on Chinese migrant domestic workers' workplace issues served as a starting point for my PhD dissertation research, which was conducted between 2008 and 2010. During my first research project, I found that live-in workers were almost wholly dependent on their employers to provide food, board, and wages, and were especially vulnerable to mistreatment since they lived and worked in the same environment. This situation has not changed much; live-in workers still lack privacy and freedom to varying degrees, and their work schedule, sleeping conditions, bathing, eating and free time are determined by their employers. In 2005-2007 there were few part-time or hourly workers in Beijing, but by 2009 their numbers had greatly increased. These workers have the resources to live on their own, and in 2009-2010 preferred to do so even if it meant sharing an accommodation such as a 200-300 RMB per month cold and unventilated basement room, which was unthinkable cheap for wealthier urban residents, but still a significant expense for migrants. Now many migrants have been pushed out to the distant outskirts of Beijing.¹² They either take hourly jobs (*xiaoshigong*) for clients as needed or work regularly for certain clients on a monthly basis (*baoyue*).¹³ Dan Ma also describes these two categories, but within the *xiaoshigong* category, lists daytime/nighttime eight hour shift workers, flexible workers who have multiple clients,

¹¹ Xinying Hu, *China's New Underclass: Paid Domestic Labour* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 112-22. It is possible for these workers to file civil cases or appeal to the Labor Bureau, but they tend to avoid these formal channels.

¹² Xiaobo Zhang, "Tiny Apartments Not Allowed," *Global Times*, July 25 2013. Both increased rent and a new regulation banning people from living in small spaces of less than five square meters per tenant have pushed migrants to the outskirts of Beijing which are less expensive and less regulated. This also results in long work commutes.

¹³ I categorize domestic workers as either live-in or hourly. "Hourly workers" includes all those who live on their own, whether they work part-time, by the day, week or month.

and those hired by the month or who are regular (*guding*).¹⁴ I divide my respondents into these two categories instead of refining them further, because the defining difference is whether or not a worker lives with their employer, and hence the degree of freedom and autonomy she possesses. However, many hourly workers work one-off jobs for multiple clients, which can be even more physically demanding than live-in work and which are unmediated by a personal relationship with the client.

Stereotypes about cleaning and carework and about the domestics themselves are slow to change, and urban employers frequently still view and treat these women as cheap, expendable labor. Domestic workers say there are both good and bad employers, and indicate that not everyone suffers from serious exploitation or mistreatment, although many do. It is common for domestic workers, even when not explicitly mistreated, to be subjected to less blatant forms of subordination such as indirect put-downs, being ordered around and treated with suspicion. Some housekeeping agency staff even acknowledge the prevalence of workers' subordination. In 2006, a staff member at a branch of a very well-known chain of housekeeping agencies in Beijing told me that discrimination against workers is very common. In 2008, an interview with a manager at another location of the same chain revealed what she saw as the problems that workers encounter: "we have a lot of high-level consumers, so their demands for cooking and cleanliness are quite high, and the domestic workers don't reach these standards." The manager of another agency said that some problems include not being treated as equals, being fed leftover food, and sexual harassment. However, she also mentioned that the threshold of entry to domestic work is very low, so all types can enter. The managers' comments suggest that workers are frequently seen to be uneducated, under-qualified or incompetent, and socially inferior to their employers. Such views on domestics' social and professional inadequacy only contribute to the likelihood of subordination occurring.

I have found that most domestic workers do not openly resist workplace subordination or directly negotiate for change. Instead, they usually comply or silently tolerate the situation until they finally leave their job. Some workers may mention an issue, but then let it drop if their employers are not receptive. When hourly workers are underpaid, they may protest but then often accept the loss before the situation escalates,

¹⁴ Dan Ma, "'Beijing Shi Jiazhenggong Yanjiu" (A Study about Beijing's Domestic Workers)," (2011), http://www.china-gad.org/Treasure/UploadFiles_8983/201208/2012082717074690.pdf.

and do not continue to advocate for themselves.¹⁵ For the most part, the workers I spoke with were aware of when they had been treated wrongly or immorally, particularly when they experienced a conspicuous form of subordination. This awareness was evident from their criticism of the subordination, their expression of their feelings of anger and dehumanization, and the frequency with which they changed jobs. Yet, this awareness was unable to induce most workers to try to alter their work situation and power relations. This question of why people comply, even when they are acutely aware of their subordination, is at the heart of my dissertation.

It is simplistic to assume that migrants remain silent and comply with subordination solely because they lack the official channels through which they could readily attain justice. This explanation discounts the possibility of individual agency in dealing with subordination, and does not take into account the complex array of factors that influence how people act in response to subordination. Furthermore, a small number of domestic workers whom I interviewed consistently responded to subordination by resisting or speaking out. The fact that some workers can and do stand up for themselves, provokes the question of why most do not.

Domestics beyond China's borders, such as Southeast Asian domestic workers, share many similarities in their treatment, status, and lack of power and rights, despite considerable cultural differences. Many existing studies center on the Filipina, Indonesian and Sri Lankan workers who migrate to countries ranging from Malaysia to Italy. In the past two decades or so, this literature has become increasingly engaged with themes such as the role of the nation-state and state policy, global care chains, transnationalism, human rights, citizenship, the feminization of international labor and migration, and globalization.¹⁶ Few recent works are single-country studies of local

¹⁵ For the purpose of this thesis, I define advocacy as workers acting in a way, usually accompanied by verbal explanation, which communicates the issue to their employers and their desire or determination to change it. Advocacy could include discussing the problem, reasoning or negotiating for change. It may also involve openly hinting at or expressing their feelings, such as when workers express their anger at being cheated of their wages or when dehumanized, at their loss of dignity. It does not include resistance which is not visible to the employer. It does not necessarily entail success, but the actions themselves can bring about change because they engage the person with whom they have an issue or who has the power to change the situation. I focus on narratives where advocacy is evident, and where a worker repeatedly advocates for herself.

¹⁶ Bridget Anderson, "Selling the Self: Commodification, Migration and Domestic Work," in *Doing the Dirty Work: The Global Politics of Domestic Labour* (London, UK: Zed Books, 2000); Christine B. N. Chin, "Infrapolitics of Domestic Service: Strategies of & Resistances to Control," in *In Service and Servitude: Foreign Female Domestic Workers and the Malaysian "Modernity" Project* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); Nicole Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Migrant Workers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007/1997); ———, ed. *Migrant Workers in Asia: Distant Divides*,

domestic workers, a fact which serves to highlight the very significant international flows of migrant women workers who are responding to international demands for domestic work.¹⁷ China is unusual in that virtually all of its large population of domestic workers is local.

In studies on Southeast Asian workers, low pay, long hours and poor treatment surface as common complaints. Some scholars pursue these issues by discussing activism or policy, or address domestics' work disputes and mistress-maid relations. They explore employers' strategies for controlling workers and reproducing hierarchy and social difference, including maternalism, social distancing, and control of food and space.¹⁸ There are notable differences amongst foreign domestic workers' abilities to organize and advocate for themselves, as illustrated by Indonesian and Filipina workers. Indonesians are more burdened by negative stereotypes and lack the organizational presence and support that Filipinas possess in certain countries. Mainland Chinese domestic workers, by and large because of institutional and political constraints, have been unable to organize or obtain the level of visibility that Hong Kong Filipina workers have.¹⁹ Globally, domestic workers tend to suffer from discrimination and other issues in the workplace, whether they migrate to a country where they occupy a low social status because of their nationality, ethnicity, gender or occupation, or whether they hold a similar status to rural workers within their own country's urban informal sector. It is worthwhile researching the experiences of domestic workers who form a large segment of the marginalized migrant population in China, and whose lives are shaped by China's rapid urbanization, industrialization, and heightened rural-urban inequality.

Recent important studies on Chinese migrant domestic workers also note their significant lack of power and influence over their workplace and conditions, and the generally individualized and non-transformative nature of their acts of coping and resistance. They employ a variety of framing concepts and discourses related to women's identities and representations, development, the media, the market, gender and

Intimate Connections (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010); Rhacel Salazar Parrenas, *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

¹⁷ Janet M. Arnado, *Mistresses & Maids: Inequality Among Third World Women Wage Earners* (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University Press, 2003).

¹⁸ Anderson, "Selling the Self: Commodification, Migration and Domestic Work," 108-25; Arnado, *Mistresses & Maids: Inequality Among Third World Women Wage Earners*; Chin, "Infrapolitics of Domestic Service: Strategies of & Resistances to Control."

¹⁹ Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong*.

patriarchy, and modernity.²⁰ Certain studies address the characteristics particular to domestic work in China, such as many employers' assumption that rural domestic workers have lower *suzhi* (quality) than urban people, which then becomes a cause for discrimination.²¹ These discussions can be supplemented by Western academic studies of Chinese migrant factory workers that focus on labor and rights issues related to globalization, citizenship, state control, exploitation and unrest.²²

Among the authors who have conducted research on Chinese migrant domestic workers, Wanning Sun contributes to an understanding of how the migrant domestic worker subject is shaped by Chinese mass media discourses, such as the one which views them "as a perennial source of fear and anxiety," and which can justify greater monitoring and control.²³ Sun also explores domestic workers' "everyday politics," and shares my concern that neither the state, nor the market, are likely to support or protect workers. She finds workers' acts of resistance against "the regime of the workplace" to be minor, such as when workers use an employer's phone without permission or relax instead of working when they are alone. These acts may appear inconsequential, but they can help maintain workers' dignity.²⁴

Tamara Jacka rightly argues that, although constrained and marginalized by dominant discourses about the rural migrants and *dagongmei* ("working sisters"), rural women are not "passive objects, unable to speak for themselves."²⁵ She distinguishes between the forms of narrative her informants use to speak about migrant suffering,

²⁰ Arianne Gaetano, "Off the Farm: Rural Chinese Women's Experiences of Labor Mobility and Modernity in Post-Mao China (1984-2002)" (University of Southern California, 2005); Hu, *China's New Underclass*; Tamara Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China: Gender, Migration, and Social Change* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006); Wanning Sun, *Maid in China: Media, Morality, and the Cultural Politics of Boundaries*, (New York: Routledge, 2008); Hairong Yan, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008). I note that most of these works do not solely concern domestic workers.

²¹ Tamara Jacka, "Cultivating Citizens: Suzhi (Quality) Discourse in the PRC," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 17, no. 3 (2009); Sun, *Maid in China*; Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*.

²² Anita Chan, *China's Workers Under Assault: The Exploitation of Labor in a Globalizing Economy*, ed. Mark Selden, Asia and the Pacific (London, England: M.E. Sharpe, 2001); Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (LA, California: University of California Press, 2006); Ngai Pun, *Made in China: Women Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Dorothy J. Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China: Peasant Migrants, the State, and the Logic of the Market* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

²³ Sun, *Maid in China*: 128-29.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 147-48.

²⁵ Jacka defines the term *dagongmei* as migrant women working as waged laborers. In Chinese gender and labor studies *dagongmei* is frequently translated as "working sisters." Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*: 24, 302.

such as “speaking bitterness” and “human rights” narratives.²⁶ I also have found in my research that rural women can speak for themselves and of their experiences. However, there is a difference in intent and consequence between telling one’s story to peers and possibly sympathetic others and communicating with those who treat one unjustly in order to change a situation. Feelings of helplessness and indecision may even be reinforced after hearing other workers’ negative experiences and feelings of frustration and vulnerability. I will address both forms of speaking out; communicating with one’s peers about one’s suffering and communicating with employers to address subordination.

Even though workers may feel unempowered when mistreated at work, they often speak about their grievances to others outside the workplace. An unpacking of domestics’ narratives and actions reflects this commonplace occurrence. Such narratives possess their own power, and when they include language indicating an awareness of differential power relations, class, or commodification of their labor or selves, they demonstrate socio-political consciousness. This consciousness situates a worker within her relations of inequality, in which she finds discrimination or mistreatment not only personal and particular to her labor relations, but to occur in similar relationships across society, which can be explained by social difference and power inequalities. I view socio-political consciousness as critical to the second form of speaking out mentioned above, which entails advocacy or breaking the silence generated by the dominant.

Hairong Yan discusses the role of *suzhi* in female migrant workers’ self-development and China’s “Development.”²⁷ Domestic workers are expected to raise their *suzhi* (personal quality) by learning from their labor and from higher-*suzhi* urbanites. She speaks of the negative effect of *suzhi* on workers’ subjectivities: “[T]he notion of *suzhi* in the neoliberal economy compels a conception of the human subject as lacking, in need of constant adjustment, supplementation, improvement, and continual retraining.”²⁸ I address *suzhi* not so much within the context of Development and the urbanization of rural workers, but as part of the women’s ethical identities. Rather than focusing on how *suzhi* commodifies the value of workers, I explore how domestic workers attempt to enact and negotiate their ethical values, and how they improve their *suzhi* and ethics through practices that include and go beyond their paid labor.

²⁶ Ibid., 275.

²⁷ Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*: 111-43. Development with a capital “D” refers to the type of development promoted by organizations such as the World Bank.

²⁸ Ibid., 137.

Previous studies by Arianne Gaetano, Xinying Hu, Tamara Jacka, Wanning Sun, and Hairong Yan, have documented and analyzed domestic workers' challenges and agency through their narratives, but the factors which cause them to silently comply with subordination have yet to be thoroughly researched. Unlike these other studies that propose changes in law, policy, state provision for care, NGO support, or collective action,²⁹ I start from the level of the workers and their current situation. I agree that large-scale collective action and state provision of accessible legal protections would likely have the most effect on improving workers' treatment and access to justice, but this scenario is not yet a reality. As workers' actions are currently individualized and isolated, I seek to conceptualize how workers are bound within various power relations and what their experiences of hardship and subordination mean to them, and to identify factors that contribute to their silence and inaction. Together, these understandings offer a far more comprehensive explanation of why domestic workers respond as they do.

A minority of workers I interviewed, consistently stood up for themselves when subordinated, despite possessing similar background and experience to their more compliant colleagues. It is critical to draw out the reasons how and why these women have been able to gain "critical consciousness" and overcome the barriers that promote their silence. Paulo Freire explores the engagement of the oppressed in a struggle for liberation, which entails critical awareness about their oppression, reflection and action.³⁰ This process of coming to critical consciousness (*conscientização*) "refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality." Freire delves into the complicated dynamics of the oppressed who have internalized dominant norms, who are accustomed to being silent, and who are fearful of what gaining freedom entails.³¹ Having internalized the norms and the form of the oppressors, the oppressed will become motivated to break free only when they realize how they have been influenced and controlled.³² The "culture of silence" is the situation in which subordinated people do not question or

²⁹ Gaetano, "Off the Farm," 137-242; Hu, *China's New Underclass*; Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*; Sun, *Maid in China*; Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*.

³⁰ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 1970/2007), 51.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 35, 47.

³² I do not think that the subordinated completely internalize the norms and the form of the oppressors, but as I further discuss in the chapter on power, subordination and socio-political consciousness, there may often be a partial acceptance or internalization of dominant norms and discourses, such as those pertaining to an "ideal domestic worker."

challenge their oppression.³³ For Freire, fatalism and lack of hope result not from “limit-situations,” that is situations that limit people, but rather from how people view their situation. If they come to think that obstacles are surmountable, they are likely to feel hopeful and to try to overcome the limits. Freire sees each action that overcomes an obstacle as increasing hope and expanding freedom as it helps set new boundaries and limits.³⁴ I agree that one’s perception of one’s situation will shape one’s response. Many domestic workers are resigned and passive at times, but their “silence” does not signify complete lack of voice and passivity. “Silent” domestic workers do not attempt to challenge oppressive structures, but may act in ways that help them to cope and survive. Freire cites Vieira Pinto’s interpretation of “limit-situations” which are not “the impassible boundaries where possibilities end, but the real boundaries where all possibilities begin.”³⁵ A limit-situation for domestic could be when they are treated poorly, but feel that they do not have the power to complain. However, if they realize that they are oppressed by their employers and by their silence, they could act to overcome these situations that limit them. Freire used literacy groups and facilitated group inquiry through dialogical problem posing, so that the oppressed could learn that reality is not static and predetermined, but that human action can transform the world, and that the oppressed have the right to be participants in that transformation. The participants in his groups learn to critique and contest the structures that oppress them.³⁶

In the context of Chinese domestic workers who are isolated and the vast majority of whom have not benefited from NGO activities or training, I interpret critical consciousness as an organic form of critical awareness and action. By organic, I do not refer to a cohesiveness or interdependence of parts of society, but the natural development of a consciousness that arises without external facilitation, and which is more “of the people.” Freire’s critical consciousness does not arise organically, rather, it is supported by organized literacy groups and it is facilitated. This consciousness involves what Freire refers to as “confront[ing] reality critically”³⁷ and what I refer to as socio-political consciousness, whereby based on their own and their colleagues’ experiences, domestic workers recognize how unequal power relations contribute to their differential treatment and oppression. As their subordination is fairly

³³ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: 61-64.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁵ Alvaro Borges Vieira Pinto, *Consciência e Realidade Nacional* (Rio de Janeiro: Inst Sup. de Estudos Brasileir, 1960), Vol. II, p. 284, cited in Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: 99.

³⁶ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: 47-54, 79-81.

³⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: 52.

individualized, the extent and nature of their understandings differ greatly, and they have not yet reached the point of collective action. Although the critical consciousness that I address could certainly occur through supported learning like group inquiry, more importantly, it can arise without facilitation simply through the experiences of oppressed workers. Domestic workers' progress towards critical consciousness is therefore more of an individual learning process than organized group inquiry, although sharing their experiences with their peers in the course of everyday dialogue can contribute significantly to their socio-political consciousness. Rather than studying people as a group (the oppressed) and focusing on interventions that promote their critical consciousness, I study the distinct characteristics of the individuals who have already attained it and compare them with those who have not. I also explore the phenomenon and implications of "voice" that illustrates critical consciousness, and which occurs when domestic workers resist or speak out in response to subordination.

Gaining socio-political consciousness means starting to understand the relations that bind one and others. It has the potential to lift the veil from one's "limit-situation" to reveal the possibility of not being oppressed, and it can delegitimize the culture of silence. In a congruent line of thought, Diana Meyers suggests that persons who are "multiply oppressed," may be more qualified "to exercise autonomous moral and political agency, than multiply privileged individuals are."³⁸ Although subjugated individuals may find it harder to exercise their agency or may not understand how they are influenced by oppression, they may nonetheless have a viewpoint attuned by their experiences that guides them well in autonomous moral and political decisions.³⁹ Many domestic workers in Beijing fall into the category of "multiply oppressed," as mostly older women,⁴⁰ poor rural migrants, and domestic workers. Although oppressed workers may be better situated to exercise agency because of their past experiences and viewpoint, their actual ability to systematically resist and advocate for themselves would need to be supported by increased socio-political consciousness and the willingness to act.⁴¹

³⁸ Diana Tietjens Meyers, "Intersectional Identity and the Authentic Self? Opposites Attract!," in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 152.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 152-53.

⁴⁰ "Older women" indicates women in their 30s and 40s and beyond whose life paths are now restricted by their lack of education, lack of choice in professions, and their familial responsibilities.

⁴¹ Workers' socio-political consciousness can be increased to varying degrees by their experiences and learning. For example, some forms of consciousness may include recognition of workers' low status and experiences of discrimination, but the workers may not recognize why it occurs. If a worker believes that

My work contributes to the academic literature on Chinese migrant domestic workers, and the literature addressing the situation of marginalized and subordinated groups. I bring a viewpoint which valorizes a focus on how people think about themselves and their relations with others. Workers' perspectives are influenced by their social positions and ascribed identities, but are far from dependent upon these factors and can always change. Within a group of seemingly homogenous people such as female migrant domestic workers, with similar levels of education and backgrounds, there will always be those who choose to act very differently and who do not accept the status quo.⁴² If there are enough of these people, they provide the impetus for an alteration of the status quo. And indeed, the situation of poor and marginalized people in China is changing. However, the majority of subordinated domestic workers still feel that they cannot change the status quo. Domestic workers' attitudes and actions are affected by a multitude of factors, including the social and psychological. Therefore, my research is additionally informed by social psychology, which examines how individuals' thoughts, feelings and behaviors are influenced by others. I believe that my study has also been enriched by considering the cognitive level, which is a part of social psychology that deals with one's thinking, knowing, and beliefs and perceptions about oneself and one's surroundings.

I adapt the bones of Albert Bandura's socio-cognitive theory, which proposes that "a full understanding [of human behavior] requires an integrated causal system in which sociostructural influences operate through psychological mechanisms to produce behavioral effects."⁴³ This is a powerful way to theorize about individuals in society and within particular environments, which acknowledges that decision-making and actions are part of a changing process. They are influenced by one's environment, social influences, what one learns from one's past actions and from interactions with others,

subordination is part of the migration experience, and does not question why it happens or attribute blame, she is unlikely to resist.

⁴² There is no significant advantage seen in the levels of education, age, years of migration or domestic work experience of those who openly advocated for themselves versus the majority of workers. For example, the workers who advocated for themselves range in age from 18 to their late 40s (most were in their 30s and 40s), and the rest range in age from their late 20s to early 50s. The level of education of the minority ranges from illiteracy or no education to graduating from middle school, and that of the majority ranges from illiteracy to high school education. The years of migration experience of the minority range from a few to 20 years (only one worker lived in Beijing for 20 years), and that of the majority range from several months to 27 years (only one worker lived in Beijing for over 20 years). Some of those who advocated for themselves were live-in workers, and some were hourly workers. The years of domestic work experience for all the workers range from several months to over 10 years.

⁴³ Albert Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory: An Agentic Perspective," *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 2, no. 1 (1999): 24.

and by what one anticipates as possible outcomes of future actions. Bandura's theory employs concepts of intentionality, forethought and self-reflection, which allow for individuals to assess situations and decide upon an action based on prior knowledge, new information, different possible outcomes, and their perceived capabilities. Individuals' perceptions and actions are strongly linked to their self-identity and beliefs about efficacy, or whether they see themselves as capable of achieving a positive outcome. Their actions are also linked to their moral agency, which through positive or negative self-sanctions, pushes them to behave humanely. Their perceptions and beliefs help them to evaluate themselves and guide their conduct. According to Bandura, self-efficacy can be affected by various things, such as social modeling (seeing others similar to yourself succeed or fail), mastery experiences (learning from your own successes and failures), social persuasion, and physical and emotional states. If one does not believe that one is capable of completing an action or attaining change, one's agency is diminished.⁴⁴ Catriona Mackenzie, writing about individual autonomy from a feminist standpoint, concurs: "agents are motivated to act only if they have a conception of their actions as effective, as making a difference."⁴⁵ For example, if an experience confronting an abusive employer has left a worker feeling vulnerable and more afraid, other domestic workers who hear her story may learn to fear similar situations and adjust their behavior accordingly. However, other workers may feel that it is immoral to treat others as inferior, and may have developed enough confidence through the success of repeatedly acting on this belief to advocate for themselves and others. One can better understand workers' perspectives and actions by delving into these complexities.

My thesis is immersed in questions of power and subordination, principally: in what ways are workers subordinated? How does subordination impact workers? And notably, how does subordination work to elicit compliance in some, while others resist? I draw upon theorists from Michel Foucault to Steven Lukes who are concerned with relations of power, the mechanism of power, and its effects on the subordinated.⁴⁶ It remains a

⁴⁴ Ibid., 12-19, 22-26; Albert Bandura, and Kay Bussey, "Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation," *Psychological Review* no. 106 (1999).

⁴⁵ Catriona MacKenzie, and Natalie Stoljar, ed. *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 140.

⁴⁶ Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Franz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks* (London, UK: Paladin, 1967/1970); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 1975/1977); Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; Marilyn Frye, "The Politics of Reality: Oppression," (2010), <http://feministtheoryreadinggroup.wordpress.com/2010/11/23/marilyn-frye-the-politics-of-reality-oppression/>; John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, Second

much contemplated and still open question as to how power achieves compliance or why people submit in the presence of or after the exercise of such power. One line of reasoning these theorists have followed involves how “invisible” power works. James Scott focuses on both public and hidden transcripts of the elite and subordinated, and queries, “Eventually we will want to know how the *hidden* transcripts of various actors are formed, the conditions under which they do or do not find public expression, and what relation they bear to the public transcript.”⁴⁷ I pursue Scott’s invocation by attempting a multifaceted interpretation of domestic workers’ narratives, which reveal how workers feel, how they act in front of their employers, and the sentiments they keep hidden from their employers, like resentment and humiliation. My interviews do not constitute unvarnished “hidden transcripts,” but many workers did express their dissatisfaction with their work and employers, as well as with how domestics are viewed by the public. I also pursue the reasons why their public transcripts so often remain consistent with what their employers desire and benefit from. In Lukes’ discussion of three-dimensional power, he suggests that Scott does not address the possibility that domination can effectively be invisible to the subordinated, instead he presents his peasants as knowingly choosing to act compliant.⁴⁸ However, people are not always fully cognizant actors, and can even be unaware in certain situations that they are subordinated or can fail to recognize the oppressive nature of the social norms they follow, particularly if the subordination is subtle or deeply ingrained. Diana Meyers looks at the autonomy of persons with intersectional identities who are affected by oppressive systems. She points out that although one’s actions and thoughts might be shaped by such systems, it does not necessarily follow that one is aware of the connection: “Intersectionally constituted subjects may or may not notice attributes that stem from crosscutting systems of domination and subordination, and when they notice such attributes, they may or may not understand them as consequences of these social structures.”⁴⁹ Oppressed individuals may therefore realize that they are subordinated, but remain unaware of the underlying socio-structural influences. The workings of power are often far from being clear and undisguised.

Edition ed. (Houndsmills, Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Judith Rollins, *Between Women: Domestic and Their Employers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985); James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Eric Wolf, *Envisioning Power: Ideologies of Dominance and Crisis* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

⁴⁷ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*: 14.

⁴⁸ Lukes, *Power*: 130-31.

⁴⁹ Meyers, “Intersectional Identity and the Authentic Self? Opposites Attract!,” 153. An intersectionally constituted subject refers to someone whose identity is made up of multiple and sometimes conflicting social identities, such as race, gender, and class.

The more subtle mechanisms of power are of particular interest, and can be active in a wide variety of situations not limited to domestic workers. Rather than just examining the compliance that results from the overt exercise of power such as with slavery or violence, one should ask how less extreme and more subtle forms bring about compliance, often without the person being fully aware of or understanding the process. These issues are explored throughout the dissertation in relation to Chinese domestic workers. In chapter 3, which addresses power, I contribute to the literature through my examination of what underpins power, the forms of power exercised over workers, and finally the various mechanisms of power and its effects. I also advance a perspective on power that includes the psychological, such as how workers' ascribed identities and subordination affect how they see themselves, and how they process experiences of subordination. I detail how a range of subordinating acts and influences can have psychological impacts on workers, and the various outcomes.

Domestic workers' actions vary on a spectrum from silence, compliance and passivity, to resistance, negotiation, and self-advocacy. It is not as important to understand the many gradations of resistance and action as to comprehend the reasons for action or inaction, voice or silence, and to question why workers adopt given actions. Domestic workers may react inconsistently to poor treatment and conditions, depending on the situation, the actors involved, and the factors that influence their psychological mindset at that time. Accordingly, to augment my analysis of the various manifestations of resistance, I also consider the role and impact of workers' values, self-identities, past experiences, and socio-political consciousness.

Among the many pressures domestics face in the workplace, are ethical expectations and dilemmas. In order to understand issues of morality, I draw upon a diverse literature from disciplines including anthropology, gender studies, social psychology and philosophy, in addition to the previously cited studies.⁵⁰ Other scholars writing about Chinese domestic workers have touched upon morality in the form of filial piety, moral economy, feminine virtue, media accounts of immoral maids, the implied immorality of workers' subjugation, and in one case, the absence of blame for (immoral) marital

⁵⁰ Jonathan Haidt, "Morality," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 1 (2008); Nick Haslam, "Dehumanization: An Integrative Review," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 10(2006); Jinglin Li, "Mencius' Refutation of Yang Zhu and Mozi and the Theoretical Implication of Confucian Benevolence and Love," *Zhexue Yanjiu (Philosophical Research)* 5, no. 2 (2010); Justin Oakley, *Morality and the emotions* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1992); Jarrett Zigon, *Morality: An Anthropological Perspective* (Oxford ; New York: Berg, 2008).

abuse.⁵¹ I fill in a gap in this literature by concentrating on the link between workers' ethics and moralities and their actions. I explore the impact of Chinese ethical discourses on their actions, and the domestic workers' engagement with moral issues, which extends beyond the workplace. These women have been grappling with moral issues in different forms and contexts throughout their lives. They deal with questions about their moral values which may conflict with others' opinions; about their own moral identities within contexts such as family, work and the city; and about the injustices that are dealt to them. There is insufficient exploration and explanation of the moral worlds of Chinese rural women, female migrant workers, and certainly domestic workers, and I hope my analyses will contribute useful perspectives on the relations between these women's ethical and moral understandings, and how they see themselves and choose to act.

In the Chinese domestic worker literature, Wanning Sun is the only scholar to focus extensively on morality as related to domestic work. She is interested in the impact of the moral depiction of the maid in the media, and the "moral economies" of the village and city. While media stories appeal for compassion for hapless migrant workers, and serve to delimit the moral boundaries for how male middle-class employers should act towards their domestics, they also highlight how public discourse ignores the moral and emotional choices migrants face.⁵²

In contrast to Sun, who mostly discusses domestic workers as they are seen or represented morally by others, I examine how domestic workers view and represent themselves and their experiences, and how they choose to act. I therefore offer a more worker-centered approach, which theorizes about the process of moralizing and moral learning; the influence of moral aspirations on workers' self-identity and actions; and the bearing their moral reasoning and values have on their responses to subordination. I link the processing of experiences of discrimination and dehumanization through a moral lens with socio-political consciousness. Reflecting on the moral aspect of subordinated workers' experiences, I write extensively about what influences female migrant domestic workers' ethical identities, and the implications of these influences on their informal codes of conduct. These analyses are crosscut by themes of gender, social status, identity, and rural-urban difference.

⁵¹ Gaetano, "Off the Farm," 72-134; Hu, *China's New Underclass*; Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*; Sun, *Maid in China*; Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*.

⁵² Sun, *Maid in China*.

To conclude, my dissertation addresses domestic workers' situation, status and identities; what is important to them ethically and in terms of their priorities; how their past informs their present actions; factors that influence how they act and see themselves within situations of inequality; and how they and their experiences are shaped by the social and political—by poverty, related structural constraints, material hardships and oppression, social norms, morality, and by their subordination. In my writing, I move back and forth between the level of social-cultural and political influences on people and the revealing particularities and specificities of individuals' situations, using ethnographic passages from my interviews and discussions with the workers. Through narratives reflecting their lived experiences, their indignation, silences and actions, I seek to ensure that the individual and particular is never lost. By unraveling, examining and reflecting on the data of these individuals, and by acknowledging that they are not a wholly homogenous group, it becomes obvious that there is no simple explanation for silence or resistance, submission, suffering or refusal. Although everyone's experience is unique, the women are brought together through their shared gender, class and work identities, and by their lived experiences as domestic workers marked by their treatment as the "other," the outsider, the laborer. Not all domestic workers are treated badly, deprived, discriminated against and oppressed, but they are still part of the migrant underclass in urban society, their wages and treatment are dictated by the desires of their employers, and they possess no collective leverage to improve their conditions and status. This dissertation does not engage with the experiences of domestics who are treated well by their employers, in order to fully focus on the experiences and responses of those who have encountered and are challenged by the widespread discrimination against migrant domestic workers. The main themes from the domestic workers' accounts mirror the experiences of subordination and silencing of innumerable individuals who leave rural China to join the urban economy.⁵³ My interrogation of domestic workers' subordination and consequent actions offers insight into the many challenges migrants face in advocacy and attaining critical consciousness, while also highlighting the examples of women who rebel against their subordination and claim their right to better treatment.

⁵³ Chan, *China's Workers Under Assault*; Chan, "Community-based Organizations for Migrant Workers' Rights," 8-10; Lee, *Against the Law*; ———, ed. *Working in China: Ethnographies of Labor and Workplace Transformation* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Pun, *Made in China*; Solinger, *Contesting Citizenship in Urban China*.

FIELDWORK AND METHODOLOGY

My previous research project, “The Action Research Project on Domestic Workers,” (*Jiazhenggong Xingdong Yanjiu Xiangmu*) ran for two years, from 2005 to 2007. With the help of volunteers, my project interviewed over 100 female and male domestic workers about their workplace issues and particularly sexual harassment in the workplace. For my PhD research, I traveled to Beijing three times for a total of more than 13 months; my fieldwork started in November 2008 and ended in July 2010.

My applied PhD research project used three principal methods of data-gathering: semi-structured individual in-depth interviews with domestic workers and a few employment agency staff, focus groups and discussion groups, and semi-structured life history interviews. In total, I conducted 36 individual interviews, eight life history interviews, three interviews of employment agency staff, three discussion groups (with two workers each), and four focus groups with a total of 22 participants, some of whom I also interviewed individually. The vast majority of my informants were married with children, and were in their 30s and 40s, with a handful in their late 20s and fewer still in their 50s. I found them both through housekeeping agencies and through domestic worker contacts. Many of my informants had found their work through intermediary agencies which were mostly spread throughout northeast Beijing, but some also found work through connections or word-of-mouth. I did not pre-select informants who had experienced subordination. A few had never experienced subordination and were happy with their employers, but most had experienced some form of subordination at some point, if not more frequently.

I approached the housekeeping agencies by telling them I was a foreign visiting scholar at Peking University researching domestic workers’ issues. Some of the agencies were willing to cooperate since I paid the workers the normal hourly rate, and they did not ask me about the content of my interviews. I felt it was only fair to pay the workers since I was interviewing them during their normal work hours. I also paid workers who did not come through agencies, or who came after hours, even though some tried to return the money, saying that they felt happy they had the opportunity to talk or that they wanted to help my research. Agencies normally have more hourly workers available since they often return to the agency on a daily basis, but have far fewer live-in workers, who only return in their spare time or when they are unemployed. I was able to interview a similar number of each, since when I found that I had far more

interviews with hourly workers, I asked each new interviewee and my other contacts to connect me with live-in domestic workers. The only categories of domestic workers I deliberately excluded were those who work in commercial buildings rather than in private homes, *yuesao* who are highly paid post-natal nurses, *hugong* who take care of patients in the hospital, and male domestic workers. I had previously interviewed male domestic workers, but there were so few in Beijing that I chose to concentrate on the experiences of the majority.

During my first month and a half fieldtrip for my PhD, I researched new fieldsites, reviewed former project data to inform the design and content of the semi-structured interviews, recruited and trained volunteers to help with the initial outreach and first interviews, designed the interviews and the information sheets and translated them into Mandarin, and conducted a discussion group and the life-history interviews. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin. As opposed to my first research project where I and my volunteers interviewed the domestic workers for approximately an hour in public spaces or within the one housekeeping agency that had a spare room, I planned for my dissertation research interviews to last considerably longer, and wanted to provide a “safe” space for the workers to speak without the fear of interruptions. I conducted my interviews and focus groups in two private locations in north-east Beijing. I interviewed most workers once, but a few I interviewed up to three times. On average interviews lasted two or more hours, although there were some that were approximately one hour, and some that were over three hours. The longest series of interviews of a single worker lasted 12 hours over a period of days. I refined my research framework after the focus group discussions, then during my second and final fieldtrips, I completed the interviews and discussion groups and travelled to the countryside to stay with a domestic worker informant. I provided each informant with an information sheet and obtained their consent for audio recording. Each recording was thoroughly transcribed by students in the social sciences or women’s studies. I co-facilitated all focus groups and the life-history interviews. I conducted all individual interviews on my own, except for the first few in which I was accompanied by a volunteer.

The four focus group discussions were minimally facilitated and each centered on a general theme: 1) workplace issues 2) power 3) identity 4) employers’ expectations and beliefs about workers, and how workers act in response to employer demands. The individual interviews explored questions about the workers’ backgrounds, work experiences and challenges including: discrimination, worker-employer relations,

domestic work roles and responsibilities, social difference, gender, morality, self-identities, and learning. I was interested in how the women make choices and the factors influencing their decisions, how social influences and life events have shaped their self-images, and their perceptions about power relations, control, and oppression. The interviews with agency staff elicited information about the workers' place of origin and experiences, how they found or were recruited by the agency, what services the agency offers to workers, what problems workers encounter with employers, and the agency's respective responsibilities towards workers and employers. The life history interviews provided information about domestic workers' environments, life experiences and major events, decisions and actions, and values and attitudes. The small discussion groups mirrored the themes of the individual interviews. I have used pseudonyms in place of my informants' names, in order to maintain confidentiality, but have kept their place of origin.

In this dissertation, I employ two complementary and overlapping research approaches that share similar aims and ethical priorities: critical ethnography and feminist research. With these approaches, I problematize the position and subordination of domestic workers as seen through their accounts. Critical ethnography explores social institutions, such as gender, and underlying structures of power and control that maintain oppression through their reproduction.⁵⁴ The following quote refers to the socio-political potential in using critical ethnographic methods:

She [the ethnographer] will use the resources, skills, and privileges available to her to make accessible—to penetrate the borders and break through the confines in defense of—the voices and experiences of subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach. This means the critical ethnographer contributes to emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice.⁵⁵

D. Soyini Madison also speaks of the levels of analysis that ethnographers can address:

To articulate and identify hidden forces and ambiguities that operate beneath appearances; to guide judgments and evaluations emanating from our discontent; to direct our attention to the critical expressions within different interpretive communities relative to their unique symbol systems, customs, and

⁵⁴ Catherine Marshall, and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006).

⁵⁵ D. Soyini Madison, "Introduction to Critical Ethnography: Theory and Method," in *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2005), 5.

codes; to demystify the ubiquity and magnitude of power; to provide insight and inspire acts of justice; and to name and analyze what is intuitively felt.⁵⁶

I have applied similar levels of analysis to a critical analytical framework. My approach is feminist and therefore political. I am interested in uncovering the workings of power over domestic workers, theorizing about the subtle influences that affect workers' outward appearances and actions, clarifying the role of gender and patriarchy, identifying culturally specific factors that cause workers to comply or act against their own interests, and offering their experiences as examples that either demonstrate the insidious reach of power or that offer hope for other marginalized persons to succeed in self-advocacy.

Feminist research prioritizes women's voices and experiences, researcher reflexivity, and social transformation. Although a narrative does not represent an unchanging truth, and can be considered as the speaker's perspective at a given time and for a particular audience, it still serves to communicate her reality.⁵⁷ It is critical to understand domestic workers' experiences and tales of mistreatment through their own narratives. Christine Chin's study on foreign domestic workers in Malaysia reveals the importance of listening to workers' voices. She interviewed both employers and workers, however every employer she talked to denied abuse and justified other acts of poor treatment or blamed them on their workers.⁵⁸ Some employers clearly felt they could mistreat workers, such as when some of them locked workers inside their houses, and one chained her worker.⁵⁹ Employers in general have a greater voice in public discourses, and therefore can easily drown out the voices of workers. Workers' narratives not only detail what happened to them, but can provide clues on how domestics characterize and experience subordination, which in turn offers insight into their actions and can add to D. Soyini Madison's "emancipatory knowledge."

Conducting research entails reflection on key questions about power and perception. How do my informants see me? How do they benefit from my research? Is the act of doing research an exercise of power over the interviewees? Who else benefits from my research? I know that the women saw me as like them but also as very different. I look partly Chinese, I speak passable Mandarin, and I am also a woman, but I am separated

⁵⁶ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁷ Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*: 21.

⁵⁸ Chin, "Infrapolitics of Domestic Service: Strategies of & Resistances to Control," 148.

⁵⁹ Christine Chin, "In Service and Servitude: Foreign Female Domestic Workers and the Malaysian Modernity Project" (American University, 1995), xii.

from them by culture, nationality, education, wealth and class. Many found that our interests intersect at the point of concern and hope, concern about Chinese domestic workers' conditions and negative life experiences, and hope for change. I found that quite a few workers indirectly benefited from my research, when they indicated that they felt psychologically comforted and heartened by having someone fully engaged in listening to their experiences. I myself have changed in the process of talking and listening to these women.

After I returned from the field, I had to decide how to employ workers' narratives with respect, without their stories being lost in a morass of theory or a postmodern wilderness, wherein the analysis is at risk of becoming divorced from the data, and losing practical application. As an outsider I attempted to critically analyze the relations of power the workers are subjected to, without victimizing them or unnecessarily glorifying their acts as resistance. The acts of framing and conducting individual interviews, selecting and analyzing data, and writing are all acts of power by the researcher. Devault and Gross remind us, "Researchers must be continually mindful of the power relations organizing our actions at every stage in the research process."⁶⁰ Remaining aware of this can help temper how I "translate" their experiences, but the lens still remains mine. One way that I shifted the balance of power during fieldwork was by holding loosely-led group discussions, where the center of power effectively remains with the women participants. They took control, talking animatedly, and responded to others' comments and stories about their everyday lives. Sue Wilkinson discusses how in using focus groups:

[feminists have] emphasized the shift in the balance of power--and particularly the extent to which the method enables research participants to speak in their own voice—to express their own thoughts and feelings and to determine their own agendas."⁶¹

Although I have collected many accounts of subordination, I have not used them all. To demonstrate continuity between different aspects of a worker's subordination and responses, I have woven the accounts of several domestic workers throughout the next five chapters, when their accounts fit the themes of the respective chapters. I use longer accounts from one worker named Su, both because of their richness, and because they

⁶⁰ Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, ed. *The Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2012), 187.

⁶¹ Sue Wilkinson, "Focus Groups: A Feminist Method," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (1999): 232.

serve to demonstrate different aspects of subordination and different elements of analysis. I also employ shorter accounts throughout, sometimes mentioning a worker just once, when it is beneficial to demonstrate the richness and variety of workers' narratives and experiences.

In sum, I use critical ethnography and feminist research approaches in order to conduct applied research,⁶² in which my research seeks to address serious social problems that the female domestic workers have themselves problematized, by critiquing their position and treatment in urban society and the workplace.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The five core chapters examine the ways in which critical social, cultural and political factors along with workers' lived experiences of subordination influence and impact their identities, responsibilities, values, perspectives, and choices as women, rural migrants, domestic workers, and ethical and morally motivated individuals. The core chapters respond to both research questions. They all consider the socio-political, socio-cultural and psychological factors that influence how domestic workers understand and address subordination. The discussion of the second research question, which inquires why the majority of workers do not advocate for themselves, and why a small minority do, is divided amidst the chapters. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 emphasize the ways in which gender, rurality, domestic work, power relations, and Chinese ethical identities contribute to the silence and acquiescence of the majority in the face of subordination. Chapters 5 and 6 expand upon the second research question by comparing cases of acquiescence and resistance.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on subordination within the shared socio-cultural and socio-political contexts of gender, rurality, domestic work, and power relations. Gender, migrant domestic work, and unequal power relations are common to all my informants, and serve as sites of subordination. These two chapters also address psychological and cognitive impacts of subordination. Subordination influences how workers identify

⁶² "Applied research is... original investigation undertaken in order to acquire new knowledge. It is...directed primarily towards a specific practical aim or objective." University of Oxford Research Support, "Frascati Definition of Research," Accessed on May 24, 2013, <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/researchsupport/applying/frascati/>.

themselves as women, migrants, and domestic workers. It often fosters a degree of gender consciousness and socio-political consciousness, and engenders feelings of disempowerment and psychological oppression.

The fourth and fifth chapters also explore subordination within socio-cultural and socio-political contexts, but concentrate within the respective fields of ethics and morality. They examine the often neglected yet critical considerations of ethics and morality which serve to locate the workers within society, and which shape their ethical and relational identities, norms of behavior, moral perspectives, and consequently their responses to immorality and subordination.

The sixth chapter unites several analytical elements from other chapters, and examines workers' actions of silence and voice within a broader context. This chapter explores the domestic workers' perceived capability to advocate for themselves and their perceived space for action, taking into account the influence of their values, responsibilities, and past experiences.

The core chapters move from a focus on common denominators that domestics share such as gender, domestic work and unequal power relations to aspects of the individual that are dependent upon her environment, her experiences, and perspectives on herself and her world, such as her ethics, morality and perceived capabilities. Chapter 4 addresses both common ethical discourses that workers routinely adopt and more individualistic aspects of their ethical identities. Chapters 5 and 6 emphasize the need to consider the particularities of an individual's experiences, learning and perspectives. It is particularly this examination that reveals the space for change, the capacity for action, and the motivations that develop internally rather than through an external change in economic resources or socio-political location.

Chapters

In Chapter 2, "Gender, Rural Lives, Domestic Work and Identity," I start by exploring how gender as well as inequalities derived from the urban-rural divide, have significantly impacted workers' lives from their youth to their current status as mostly married migrant workers with children. Dominant social norms for women, and their gendered sense of familial obligation, influence their identities as women and domestic workers in critical ways. I examine how women negotiate their self-identities amidst

gendered inequalities and patriarchal expectations. I identify the links between gender and domestic work, such as with the notion of “caring,” and the impact on women of the devalued domestic worker identity.

After exploring histories of gendered subordination and the impact of gender on their lives, I shift to examine how subordination works through power relations and how it affects domestic workers. Chapter 3, “Power, Subordination, and Socio-Political Consciousness,” first delves into the nature of power and subordination over domestic workers, how it is manifested through power relations, and how it effectively elicits compliance. The second half discusses the various effects that subordination has on workers, including fostering socio-political consciousness and generating psychological tension and conflict between workers’ identities.

Chapter 4, “Shaping Oneself Ethically in the Chinese Context,” explores aspects of Chinese female migrant workers’ ethical identities and norms of conduct. Domestic workers absorb social and ethical discourses and expectations about how they should act, which influences how they see themselves, and how they relate and act towards others. Their ethics are also individualistic, as with *zuoren* (being an upright person), which is an ethic that they define and choose to follow.

Chapter 5, “Exploring Workers’ Moral Practice and Responses to Immorality,” delves more deeply into the question of how the workers exercise their moral capacity. The first half of the chapter examines how workers view themselves and their own development through a moral lens, and points out how their experiences and moral perspectives relate to their practice of social critique. The second half addresses how others treat domestic workers immorally through subordination, duplicity, injustice and dehumanization, and draws links between the women’s moral understandings and their responses to immorality.

Chapter 6, “Workers’ Actions from Silence to Voice,” moves beyond looking predominantly at the influence of moral considerations on workers’ actions, to a holistic examination of their actions. I look at the range in workers’ actions from strategic silence to advocacy and critical consciousness both in their work and private lives, and discuss the reasons for the diversity of responses. The workers’ choice of action relates to their point of view, including their perspectives on power, relations, and conflict, what they have learned from past experiences, their self-identities, socio-political

consciousness, and their belief as to whether change is possible. I discuss how subordination influences how workers view their capacity to effect change, and analyze their shared knowledge and discussions as a possible catalyst for organic critical consciousness.

Chapter 7, “Conclusion,” demonstrates how my key factors shape workers’ self-identities, obligations, ethical values, and socio-political consciousness, which then engender silence, deference, compliance, self-sacrifice and a sense of powerlessness in most workers. I discuss my analytical approach to investigating the self-advocacy of the few, and the factors that underlie their practice of organic critical consciousness.

CHAPTER 2

GENDER, RURAL LIVES, DOMESTIC WORK, AND IDENTITY

In this chapter, I explore the intersection of gender, rural lives, domestic work and the women's individual, group and class identities. Gender provides a basis for the social construction of workers' identities, but their gendered experiences are also affected by their rural origins and upbringing, their low status as migrant workers, and the inequalities that are born from the rural-urban divide. Even before rural women migrate to the city for work, carework and cleaning have become part of the array of their expected responsibilities within the family. Women who take care of their families in rural areas experience a shift in their identity when what they do becomes an urban commodity. Their gendered and domestic work identities are both chosen and imposed, and shift between their rural and urban lives.

Gender has long served as a basis for discrimination and differential treatment. Innumerable Chinese women, particularly from older generations, have been discriminated against and sometimes shunned or abused because of their gender, often by their own families. Those who were mistreated by their families, as a number of my informants were, have been marked from an early age by their lack of value, and have encountered many obstacles to improving their lives. Even if they were loved and supported by their families, if they had little education and only migrated after raising their children, they still found their opportunities to be extremely limited.

My informants' gender is linked to their choice of a feminized profession, but it also likely shaped how they were treated when growing up, their access to education, their age of marriage and location of their marital home, their relationships and responsibilities as married women, their work, and how they are treated in the workplace. Their gender identities intersect with how they identify themselves as domestic workers, but most informants discussed their gendered responsibilities within their personal relations separately from their responsibilities as domestic workers. Nonetheless, within society there is a strong association between women and paid domestic work, which is linked to gendered expectations of care, mothering and careful or meticulous work. These women must work to provide for their families, and they lack the education and skills which would permit them to have other choices for work. I

suggest that when comparing their difficult experiences as rural women and domestic workers, their most visible commonalities lie with their low status and struggle to fulfill their responsibilities while managing the negative repercussions of these two identities.

The vast majority of workers that I interviewed were in their 30s and 40s, married with children, and had migrated for work in order to earn money for their families. All had grown up outside Beijing in villages, towns or small cities in which after the end of the Maoist era, gendered norms and practices seemed to revive. However, differential and discriminatory treatment of women had in fact never been eliminated during the Maoist era. Despite the rhetoric of gender equality, Alicia Leung notes that during the first part of the Maoist era, "little had been done to remove the patriarchal attitudes and concepts that gave rise to gender relations of male dominance," and then during the Cultural Revolution, women were expected to act like men but not participate in their own liberation.⁶³ Quite a few of the domestic workers mentioned that they had grown up in an environment where the belief that males are more important than females, *zhongnan qingnü*, was generally practiced. Although women's responsibilities, experiences and life paths are influenced to varying degrees by their gender, many of the workers were not cognizant of how gender had affected their lives and work, even though they ended up in feminized work. Others spoke of how their childhood, youth, and marriage had been shaped by values privileging males, which also influenced their treatment as wives and daughter-in-laws. The effects of *zhongnan qingnü* in the countryside were intensified due to the long-term divestment of resources to the cities and policy restricting rural migration, which meant not only were food shortages, scarcity, and hardships exceedingly common, but rural females often fared worse than their male counterparts and had no way out. Although these women can now migrate for work and have a higher standard of living, the *hukou* (household registration) system which has been compared to a form of apartheid,⁶⁴ has facilitated deep social, economic and political divisions between urban residents and rural migrants.

This chapter will explore my informants' two key forms of identity which reflect their current responsibilities: their identities as women, wives and especially mothers, and their work identity as domestics. Both identities are framed by the difference and inequalities born from the rural-urban divide. I will use both short and long accounts to

⁶³ Alicia Leung, "Feminism in Transition: Chinese Culture, Ideology and the Development of the Women's Movement in China," *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* 20, no. 3 (2003): 365-66.

⁶⁴ Loong-Yu Au, and Nan Shan, "Chinese Women Migrants and the Social Apartheid," *Development* 50, no. 3 (2007).

discuss their individual, group and class identities, how being a woman has influenced my informants' lives and their experiences of patriarchy, and the domestic worker identity.

I will also address the important differences that exist between their gendered identity and domestic worker identity, although paid domestic work appears to replicate women's work at home. The following chapters will discuss the moral and power-related aspects of topics raised in this chapter, such as familial obligation, ethical acts, and the commodification and devaluation of domestic work and of women and domestics themselves. Gender will be woven throughout this dissertation, for it not only affects women's identities and work, but how others see and treat them, and how they themselves think they should act ethically and in response to subordination. Workers' rural experiences and identities will also remain visible, since their poor rural origins are a reason for their entry into domestic work, and the stereotypes and low status associated with women, rurality and domestic work are a cause for subordination.

INDIVIDUAL, GROUP AND RURAL-URBAN IDENTITY

In addition to their gender and domestic worker identities, the women identify themselves as individuals, based on the groups to which they belong, and they possess varying degrees of consciousness about rural-urban difference and class. In the following chapter I will discuss how their experiences of subordination, which occur in part because of rural-urban inequality, can be sufficient to develop their socio-political consciousness. Possessing socio-political consciousness means that workers start to understand their subordination as a group or class. The women's individual identities are revealed when they describe their character and attitudes, who they are in relation to others, and how they act towards others. The specificity of the groups that they associate themselves with vary based on shared characteristics, and commonly include their profession, status as migrants, place of origin, and gender. They may envision themselves as having the same opportunities and barriers, and problems and solutions as others in their particular group. The women's identities reflect their lived experiences as well as the characteristics of groups with which they may come to identify; one identity can therefore affect the other. For instance, if the migrant domestic worker identity is characterized by negative characteristics attributed to their origins and profession, such

as rural backwardness and low status, a rural women starting domestic work may also come to see herself in a similar light.

In a focus group, Lang, a 39-year-old mother of two from Anhui who has lived in Beijing on and off for 20 years, mentioned her various identities that exist within different contexts and relationships:

If you ask me in someone else's home, of course I would say that I'm an *ayi* (popular name for a maid), that I'm a *baomu* (a common but slightly disparaging term for maid). If in my home in front of the kids, since it's at home, I could say I'm a woman, that I hold up half the sky. If it's with my husband, it's equal. Outside the home, in the public arena, if someone's suffered an injustice, I like to speak up and say something. My character is straightforward, and I have honest intentions. I like and actually love to talk. When I go to other people's homes to work, if you offer me a bit of respect, I'll surpass you [by showing even more respect]. But if they are always petty towards us, then we don't feel happy. I'll wait till I leave, then I too can say some choice words.

The passage points out the separation of her work and family identities, both of which are suffused with moral and egalitarian undertones. Lang is one of the few who has openly advocated for herself, yet it is clear that when she steps into the workplace, she is no longer seen as equal to others and tries to repress her tendency to speak out in response to minor injustices. In this passage, as many other workers do, Lang switched without pause from talking about herself to talking about "us," showing her sense of affinity with other domestic workers and their experiences.

In the same focus group, Wu Xixi, who had only two months of domestic work experience, talked about her personal and migrant worker/domestic worker identities:

We are the most simple and honest people, we aren't likely to say a lot of fancy words. But if you want to ask me who I am, I would say what my last name is, what my first name is. One thing is that we don't have education...we've also suffered wrongs.

Interestingly, Wu spoke mostly in the plural. This may be partly because she was surrounded by other workers who sat around her, and so felt that she was speaking both to them and for them. The group she identifies with is defined by their difficult experiences, and what its members lack: education and sophistication. The mention of having been wronged alludes to the vulnerability and low status of workers in urban areas. Simplicity, ordinariness, honesty and frankness are themes that emerge from

many of the workers' accounts. When describing themselves, a large number used the phrase "*putong*" or similar phrases to indicate that they are ordinary, average, and common people. Tang Ming, a reflective and inquiring hourly domestic worker with high school education, who met with me multiple times to allow for her extensive narrations, suggested that a *putong* identity means an average person, unlike actors or extraordinary people. They depend on their own labor to raise their families. She viewed being *putong* as a good thing. As an initial description of oneself, it is humble and points to one's commonality with others rather than one's individuality. For these *putong* women, identity is partly about one's actions; actions that are ordinary rather than undertaken to set themselves apart from and above others. In these ways, *putong* could be understood as more of a rural attribute. Rather than indicating a lack of ambition in setting oneself apart from others, this descriptor could indicate how the women view their possibilities for change. As part of the poor urban underclass, they know that they do not have the opportunity to elevate themselves socially or distinguish themselves in comparison to those with money and urban *hukou*.

Another more frequently discussed difference between rural and urban identities is the characteristic of *laoshi*. *Laoshi*, which means honest and frank, has taken on the additional meaning of naiveté and simple-mindedness. Tamara Jacka explains how migrants have described rural women as being too *laoshi*, which indicates people who are too honest and simple, and unable to talk compellingly.⁶⁵ Yunxiang Yan also discusses the change in desirability of being *laoshi*, how it once indicated being honest and reliable, but now means that these people can be taken advantage of.⁶⁶ Yet many workers use it to describe themselves or their husbands, which could suggest that some people still value this aspect of what is seen as a characteristic of rural identity, in addition to possibly indicating their awkwardness in operating in the fast-paced, slick city.

Tao Lin, a 45-year-old mother of two children from Shandong, is extroverted and loves talking. She appears to be feminist in addressing her private life issues, such as refusing to give up her job and have another baby to please her husband's family, but will not advocate for herself in the workplace. She described herself thus, "I'm an ordinary, average person. I just think I'm really ordinary." Many more workers

⁶⁵ Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*: 237-40.

⁶⁶ Yunxiang Yan, "Sex, Intimacy, and the Language of Love," in *Private Life under Socialism: Love, Intimacy and Family Change in a Chinese Village 1949-1999* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 77-78.

described themselves in this way than workers who took pains to point out their individual differences. Other words that many women use to describe their character include “straightforward” and “frank.” They partially attribute their lack of flowery language to their low education, which in some cases contributes to not “knowing how to speak” or “not being able to speak” [correctly], which can then cause trouble with clients who consider their workers’ comments too direct or insulting.⁶⁷ Domestic work is also associated with women of low education, and I suggest is seen as unintellectual or anti-intellectual work. Agency staff and employers sometimes treat workers as though they were simple-minded and unable to express themselves. This repeated treatment may cause the women to believe that they cannot “speak” (speak well or speak properly). Once, many years ago, when I asked the main staffer at an employment agency whether I could interview the one lone worker sitting there, the staffer spoke about the worker as though she were invisible. The worker would not meet my eyes when I talked to her, and the staffer told me that she had no education so wouldn’t be able to answer my questions or *shuohua* (speak).

Tao Lin also described how her character and attitudes influence her in the workplace:

Fundamentally I think I have consideration, a sense of responsibility, I can endure hardships and work hard, [this is how I am] towards anything. I start doing something bit by bit till I can do it. If I can’t, then I ask. I think there are also some things that I can endure (*renshou*). Like when people scold me, I don’t feel psychologically happy, but I don’t do anything to the client like counterattack, I wouldn’t do it. I can only explain that if you scold me, I’m not happy. I can only swallow it into my belly.

As with many workers, her sense of propriety and ethic of hard work prevent her from speaking out when she feels wronged by her client, and compel her to work hard through situations that she finds difficult. Possibly her consideration also prevents her from responding in like kind. Such workers not only feel unable to speak because of their low level of education, but that because of their low position, they are prohibited from speaking for themselves or resisting within unequal power relations. Instead they *renshou*.

Lin Xia, a 42-year-old Sichuanese mother of two who graduated from high school, also has a non-confrontational character with what one might consider to be feminine

⁶⁷ Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*: 239. My informants also expressed their inability to speak well.

characteristics: “I think I have a pretty open temperament (*kailang*), my temperament isn’t irritable, I get along with everyone...other people all like talking with me...I just don’t like competing with others. I think I’m unassuming, I don’t see myself as that arrogant.”

These are also all characteristics desirable in domestic workers. Tao Lin showed that she controls herself and purposefully avoids conflict, whereas Lin Xia is unlikely to cause conflict. Nearly half of her self-description is relational, regarding how she is with others. This serves to remind one how identity is oftentimes influenced by those with whom one interacts and works. Workers, particularly when dealing with difficult work situations, are likely to hide aspects of their character and to act how they think their employers want them to act. Such altered behavior can then in turn influence how they come to see themselves.

Within China, there are discussions about the proper terms for migrant workers which do not have discriminatory overtones. It is true that terms such as *mangliu* (blind currents of migrant workers), *nongmingong* (rural migrant workers),⁶⁸ and even *dagongmei* (“working sisters” or young female migrant workers) highlight the rurality and low class of workers, but changing the terms will not necessarily change preconceptions about migrant workers, nor how they are treated, or how they feel about themselves. Domestic workers frequently identify themselves with peasant workers, manual laborers and *dagongmei*. Those from rural areas appear to experience greater discrimination than domestic workers who are from the city.⁶⁹ This differential treatment highlights the horizontal divide between the urban identity and the subordinate, backwards, poor rural one. For these migrant workers, the inequalities that result from this divide are analogous to class inequalities since they are subordinated based upon their poor rural origins which relegate them to the urban underclass. Indeed, some women identify themselves by their class or social location in urban society, “we are at the lowest level of society. There is no one lower than us.” Migrant domestic workers’ identification with other workers can be a source of consolation, as they know

⁶⁸ Xinchuan He, and Qin Dou, “‘Nongmingong’: Yici de yi yu yi (Rural Migrant Workers: the Meaning and Translation of a Term),” *Xiebei Nonglin Keji Daxue (Shehui Kexue Ban) Journal of Northwest A & F University (Social Science Edition)* 13, no. 1 (2013).

⁶⁹ Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*: 84-87. Urban domestic workers are either formerly laid-off workers or older neighborhood women. Yan notes that in comparing the laid-off workers to migrant domestics, the urban workers are more accustomed to the lifestyle of their employers, they expect to be paid more, and they “put on airs...[which] makes it difficult for employers to order them around.” Local elderly women also expect more effort on the part of their employers to cultivate a good relationship.

others share their experiences, but if others' experiences are equally unhappy, it is also a potential source of feelings of marginalization and powerlessness.

Although the concept of class has fallen from favor both in scholarly literature and with the post-Mao state, I assert that it is not only relevant to understanding the position and predicament of Chinese migrant workers, but necessary. Despite the fact that the terms for "class," (*jieji*) as promoted by the state during the Maoist era, and the term for stratum (*jieceng*) that has been preferred in the post-Mao era are seldom used by domestic workers, the experiences and identities that approximate class are alive and well. Class captures an important aspect of identity, which is shaped by one's wealth, *hukou* status, profession, privileges and access to resources, and education.

Even if a domestic worker is not economically exploited, but paid fairly, she would still be considered subordinate by virtue of her class location, as evidenced through the ways that urban residents and employers commonly treat workers. However, one can have different class positions defined by one's location in society or within social groups. A worker would possess a different position when in rural society than when within urban society where her status, wages, citizenship and consumption levels would be in marked contrast to urban citizens. Most domestic workers I interviewed could be considered to be in similar locations within the working class in Beijing, but domestic workers who are from Beijing might consider themselves (and be considered) to have a higher class position within the working class because of their background, and their claims to urban citizenship along with the greater resources and status that it entails.

Tao Lin's account about class addresses the multiplicity of positions within a class, whereby some workers are better paid and hence have higher status than others, but are still treated poorly by the wealthy. I asked whether she thought that society has classes or strata, and she replied:

One's wages decide one's respective social level/class. If your wages go up, your consumption power also goes up. If you have low wages, then your consumption level cannot go up. Each social level is based upon the level of one's salary. If you earn 2,000 versus 20,000, it's absolutely different. There's a big difference between earning 200 RMB and 2000 RMB. It's because China has a lot of rural workers. For we who are working in this profession in the city, you know how many of us there are? In the countryside, out of 100 people, there are 90 who would want to come out to work. Income levels in rural areas are low. If I had 10-20 mu of land, I wouldn't have come out to work. We come out and are bullied. (I asked her what different groups there are). Take

my group. We working sisters are a pretty lowly group. There are, for example, those who work in factories, those in state run institutions; groups are definitely not the same. We who have low wages, are the lowest. But there are medium and higher grades. The service personnel in five-star restaurants certainly are not the same group as service people in [regular] restaurants.

In many workers' eyes, domestic workers are part of the lowliest social group which also possesses too little social or economic power to avoid or to respond to "being bullied."

GENDER

This section addresses the gap between discourse on gender equality⁷⁰ and its actual practice, how women feel conflicted about their gendered responsibilities, and the costs and impact of gender discrimination.

Gendered Inequalities

Women's discussions of gender and work reveal their struggles to reconcile the discourse of gender equality with the reality of their work and responsibilities. Some women automatically say that there is no *zhongnan qingnü* now, that men and women are now equal. After further discussion it turns out that it does still exist in the countryside. These women may have accepted public understandings of equality, as long as gender equality remained an abstract notion rather than applied to their own lives. Others state from the start that gender discrimination exists. They sometimes link gender to differential opportunities and lives in the countryside versus the city. Workers are likely to view urbanites as being more accepting of female children than rural people, and urban areas as closer to "gender equality." They think it is acceptable to get married later in urban areas, whereas in many rural areas women are engaged young and then married in their early 20s. Later marriage, combined with more progressive norms and better work opportunities, means that urban women can be independent and have more control over their life paths. In contrast, many of these older married rural women have had far less choice and opportunity. Some express hope for all women to be able to

⁷⁰ Liang Ying Tan, "Changing Mindsets: How China's Abnormal Sex Ratio is Turning its Government into a Champion of Gender Equality," *Asian Journal of Comparative Law* 3, no. 1 (2008): 20. Popular notions of gender equality may come from different sources ranging from social media to slogans in the State's campaigns. For example, in Henan, as a result of the unequal gender ratio, the government has promoted the Care for Girls campaign with slogans such as, "realize gender equality for social development progress" and "daughters can also achieve success."

fulfill their potential, although they themselves have led lives with limited prospects or in which others have made important life decisions for them, in large part because they are poor rural females. The following accounts deal with gendered expectations, discrimination, stereotypes about gendered work, and beliefs about equality or the potential of women.

Zhen's account reflects many women's understandings about gender equality. Notions of equality clash with women's embeddedness in a culture that still privileges men and their work.

Now don't women hold up half the sky, and they are not lesser than men, isn't that right? They are the same, it is gender equality. What men can do, women can too, right? Men can earn a living, and so can women. But the substance of the work they do isn't the same. Men can earn a living doing apartment renovations, women can earn a living doing domestic work. In the countryside it's not the same, women stay at home and cultivate the land, men go out to earn money. I think men are really important, they can do strong physical labor. They make a big contribution to the family's financial situation, I think they are admirable. At home we gossip about how much money this man brings home and that man brings home. Out [in the city] men earn money and women earn money.

Although Zhen says that there is gender equality in work, her comments show that work is gendered both in the countryside and city. Both men and women earn money, however it is gossip about men's wages that engenders admiration. Zhen also focuses on men's strength rather than women's, although as another worker once mentioned, it is often women who have great strength and higher endurance from working the land back in the countryside. Most workers' gender awareness and understandings about gender equality and inequalities remain fragmented, and are often inconsistent.

Severely affected by *zhongnan qingnü* while growing up, Lin Xia was keenly aware of the impact of gender discrimination and how unfair it was. There was no unconditional acceptance and care for many girls who, unlike boys, could be shunned from birth. Lin provided a few examples:

Seeing men as superior to women (*zhongnan qingnü*), China has the social custom that if you raise girls, they can't continue the family line; there's no following generation. Girls get married into another family, they take on other people's names...he (my father) embraced this type of attitude, he didn't like girls...For example, my first child was a boy, he was very happy, came to visit, bought him clothes and good food, if I had a girl he wouldn't have liked her, he

wouldn't have come to visit, [because] when the girl grows up she would belong to others.

Lin Xia thought that *zhongnan qingnü* also influenced some girls' schooling. Some families would let their boys attend school but not their daughters, or if resources were scarce, boys were the first priority. She also mentioned discrimination after marriage:

Some won't recognize their daughters after they get married. If they didn't consent to the marriage, some won't visit their daughters afterwards. There are some fathers, who if their daughter takes the initiative to visit her parents, the father won't let them enter the door. He won't recognize his daughter, and will break off father-daughter relations. If the parents are willing, after their daughter gets married, they will agree to her coming to visit. If [the marriage] is to someone they look down on, then they won't let her enter the door.

Such examples of *zhongnan qingnü* are not only dehumanizing, in that women can be shunned based on their social location and relations (as females/daughters/wives) rather than who they are, but illustrate the degree to which females can be marginalized within their own communities and kin networks. As family identity is very important, such discrimination can be destabilizing and adversely affect how they view themselves. One can also understand how many women would try to avoid being estranged if possible, and comply with others' desires.

As a counterpoint, through Tao Lin's account, I demonstrate how one worker deals with the costs of following her own desires rather than how others want her to be:

He (husband) didn't want me to go to work. He wanted me to stay at home and have another child. I thought about it, if I have another child, my work unit is going to expel me. [In this case] I wouldn't have work, I wouldn't get a pension, I wouldn't have any guarantees when I get old...As long as I myself have money, I'll be ok...I thought about it, I need guarantees. I can't say that in order to have another child, I'm going to lose my work...I was young, at home watching after my child, the family wanted me to have another one, so I went out to work. I worked at the factory, and he wasn't happy...Other people said I was away from home, sometimes I'd be gone three, five days, a week, and when I came home there was no one to be solicitous about me. There was no one at home, the child slept with his grandmother. Other people said when I was at work and not at home, "what sort of home is this? Cold and deserted"...People didn't understand me, they didn't know why I had to work [when my family was in good financial shape]...I [thought I] should keep my job, at that time the factory's productivity was still high, I didn't [even] take a vacation at Spring Festival, that was the time of the *tiefan wan* (iron rice bowl/secure job).

Perhaps Tao Lin's actions would have been seen as ethical if her family had needed the money, but instead she is criticized for working for herself. She privileges her own independence over the "guarantees" of marriage and her well-to-do husband, and the "comfortable" role of a *quanzhi taitai* (housewife) which many would envy. She stood up for herself at home by refusing to bow to her husband's wishes, however, later on she did not stand up to the employers who treated her poorly. The benefits of work are more important to her than justice. Sometimes she has to put up with difficult employers in order to earn the money that will safeguard her old age. If her job or relations with her employers became too difficult, she would quit. Women's past experiences of insecure relationships, and patriarchal challenges and privations, can motivate them to find an independent source of income. This relationship between past experiences and current responses to subordination will be explored further in Chapter 6. Tao knows that women are particularly vulnerable before marriage, so referencing the marginalized female identity, suggested that this be countered by girls' self-affirmation, "you must have dignity and self-respect. You must respect yourself, you must cherish yourself, especially as girls. And you must protect yourself."

In this chapter, workers' accounts reflect their dislike of or attempts to negotiate the identities that are imposed upon them. Tao describes how she addresses gendered challenges:

I think that women should go and work; you can see that now there are many successful career women, female managers or anything. You just need to have the ability, and then anything is possible, you can go out and bring down a piece of the sky, the universe. Anything is possible, even being able to display your talents. You see that now there are many female university students. One can start a new undertaking. They say that there is already equality between men and women, but gender equality where I'm from, it's not that equal. Old people say that men should go out to work and women should stay at home to raise the children...Some women like to stay at home to assist their husbands and care for their children...You don't have your own space in your life, you don't have your own freedom or ideas. For example, if you want to do something, then you can't go. Whereas if I want to do something, I go do it. If I don't succeed, is it ok to be defeated? At the very least I will make a huge effort, I will go do it, I will dare to attempt it. But if you don't go, you don't know how to do it, you don't know whether you would succeed or fail in doing it. You must personally go and attempt it.

As she noted, her stance is at odds with patriarchal norms that do not condone women's migration or work outside the home. Tao's willingness to be a primary caretaker for her

child was superseded by her desire to prove herself, although she now works as a domestic worker in large part to support her child. Tao's impassioned account suggests that although other women may appear conventional, both in lifestyle and work, they may have undisclosed examples of unconventional acts, resistance, and bravery.

While women migrate to earn money for their families, they may have an unarticulated desire to leave for reasons that benefit them personally. Tao's comment suggests that her time in Beijing is not valued primarily for what she learned through her trials or from exposure to modern urban life. Her migration experience instead helps her prove to herself that she can succeed as a woman, in enduring hardships and making an independent living in the city. This type of declaration is less socially acceptable for older married women with young children. Maria Jaschok wrote in 1995 that her respondents' mothers' lives were determined by their poverty, lack of personal control and a consuming focus on their roles as mothers and wives. She suggests that these stories communicate the women's low worth in society and the message that their daughters would do better to live differently, without such self-sacrifice.⁷¹ Although their opportunities are now more varied and gendered social norms are far less restrictive, my informants still struggle with similar pressures to make sacrifices, and similarly hope that in doing so, their children will have a better life.

Women's General Burden and Responsibilities: Holding up the Roof

Referring to the Maoist saying about women holding up half the sky, some women mentioned gender equality and their responsibility in holding the family and home together. What is conventionally considered to be women's work within the household and private sphere is seen by domestic workers as both a burden and a responsibility. In this section, excerpts from the women's interviews suggest that the women occupy this sphere where they make contributions and sacrifices, but that their work at home is not truly valued and appreciated by others. It is simply expected. These women feel that they must take on the responsibilities of housework and care as an ethical decision, but may also simultaneously feel resentful, isolated, taken-for-granted and left behind.

⁷¹ Maria Jaschok, "On the Construction of Desire and Anxiety: Contestations Over Female Nature and Identity in China's Modern Market Society," in *Women and Market Societies: Crisis and Opportunity*, ed. Barbara Einhorn and Eileen James Yeo (Brookfield, US: Edward Elgar, 1995), 122.

Their emphasis on women's care and responsibilities leaves a lacuna—which draws attention to the lack of male participation. Their husbands' more limited involvement or sometimes neglect, means that the women are left with little choice but to sacrifice their own time and potential for their children. If their in-laws are willing to care for their children, then they are free to leave, but must still dedicate themselves to earning enough money to meet family needs. They seldom get to enjoy the benefits of being in Beijing because by scrimping to save money, they can afford very few indulgences, if any.

Wu Xixi, who recently entered domestic work, felt that women have particular obligations that revolve around caring. She had to take full responsibility for taking care of her home, and particularly taking care of her child, which was a consuming and isolating experience. Her early experience of motherhood did not take place within a two-parent household or a patriarchal environment; instead she was the sole caregiver.

Being a woman on this earth is of course about caring for children, caring for the family and one's parents. You should fulfill the obligations of women. You can't say that you won't do this or that. I don't have anyone to help me, and everything without exception depends on me. When I was raising my child, no one lifted a finger to help me. My child's studies all depended on me, and I have no education. I could only cook for him and keep him warm, and [tell him] to study hard for me. I didn't go to school because I didn't have anyone to support me. Now studying is up to you.

Like Lin Xia and most other workers, Wu Xixi was intent upon providing her child with more opportunities than she had had. As gender norms change, the responsibilities and practices of mothers also change. It is they who must provide for their education, which is seen as the key to a higher quality (*suzhi*) person and a better lifestyle.

Tang Ming engaged in a social critique about the mothering role of women. In her account, motherhood requires the sacrifice of oneself and one's future. At a certain point she separated from her husband, so her experiences are of raising her children mostly on her own:

I think that women's burden is a bit heavier. I think it has to do with how at times this society is out of touch. This can be compared to after my middle school classmates graduated, and worked in a work unit. During the period of time when they raised children, they seemed to be apart from society...they took care of and raised children, then without exception, afterwards they didn't inquire about society. After I raised my children, I again merged into this society. It was to pay for these children's growth, studies etc...I'm not a

professional woman who places a lot of importance on rights and wealth. I pay particular attention to things regarding my family. I do domestic work to earn money for my children. It's like I think a bit more about my children. If I didn't have these two children, I would definitely want to...go to more places that give a bit more free rein to my potential. But it seems like there are no opportunities.

Tang Ming was the only worker to mention the sense of separation from society. It seems one has to choose whether to invest more in one's children or one's career; motherhood is the reason why so many workers engage in what they consider to be a dead-end occupation.

Song Xiaoshan, a part-time worker from Anhui with two children replied to my question about how being a woman has influenced her life:

Women have children, and so are tied down by them, so there is no way that you have any career or prospects, no notions [about it], you are just at home raising children and serving others.

Song used the same word, "to serve" (*cihou*) others, to describe her life at home as others have used to describe domestic work, which intimates that she has low status within her home. These women have indicated that their ambitions have been silenced. Both she and Tang Ming found being a woman to be bittersweet; entailing a lack of self-development, a strong maternal identity but a commitment to servicing the family above one's own needs and ambitions, which also happens to be characteristic of the domestic work profession.

Gender Discrimination and Abuse While Growing Up

In order to more fully understand the gendered experiences of women who engage in domestic work, particularly since there is a continuation between gendered identities at home and at work, the next two accounts explore the significance of gendered subordination in two life phases: growing up, and after marriage. Lin Xia's story demonstrates the extent to which discrimination against women and gendered practices in the countryside can impact women's lives. It also shows the degree of resilience and resistance that is possible for some abused rural women. These women learn about and are subject to local patriarchal practices, and respond in different ways. Such experiences can also restrict women's opportunities to the extent that by the time they

migrate for work, their lack of qualifications only permits them to engage in work like domestic work. Lin Xia learned from a very young age that her father thought that daughters were worthless, and both she and her mother had to pay heavily for his bitterness.

My experiences have been really difficult. My mother died when I was young, and I grew up [partly] with my maternal grandmother. My father was really harsh, really terrible and severe because in our family our mother raised us two girls, [she also gave birth to 5 boys, none of whom survived]. He wasn't fond of girls, he wanted boys, because in the countryside there was the common practice of seeing males as superior to females. My mother was sick ever since I was young, and my father wouldn't give her the money to see a doctor. I would argue with him, I would say to him, "you are pulling my mother to her death. You are completely intractable." When I attended school he wouldn't give me money, what was I to do if he didn't give me money? There's rice in the countryside, and I carried rice on my back and sold it. In rural areas they say that [after] raising girls, they cannot support their parents, as a result my father didn't provide for me. He just left me at home, even though my mother died, I was alone...he went to find a husband for me, a husband who would come to our home.

Lin Xia was not merely discriminated against by her father, but commodified and dehumanized. He demanded her obedience and forced her into a marriage that benefited him. It is worthwhile to note that before the age of 12, Lin was already critical of her father's views and challenged him. However, she was still dependent upon him, so in the end had to comply with his demands. In watching her mother die, Lin learned how the weak can sometimes not even afford justice, but can only hope to remind the powerful of their immorality.

When my mother died she wasn't at home, she was at my older sister's. The day she died was my father's birthday. She was thinking, "don't you (my husband) hate me? Since you hate me, I'm going to die on your birthday."

Lin was forced to grow up too quickly because of her father's misogyny and lack of involvement. She was 12 years old when her mother died, and pulled her mother's body back to their home by herself although there was rain and flooding. She said she wasn't afraid. She prepared her mother's body, combing her hair, washing and dressing her, and informed her father of her mother's death and that they were out of food. Because she understood it was necessary in the countryside to display her manners in such a desperate situation, she kowtowed and knelt down to others, which demonstrated her good upbringing. She knelt down to show her respect and to ask other villagers for help.

Lin's later years at home were a series of struggles against her father's will. Funded by her profits from selling rice, she graduated from high school at age 16. With this education, she could have had a career, but her father forced her to stay at home and get married.

My father didn't have a good disposition...After I finished school, others called me to come out...but at that time there was no such thing as going to be a *baomu* (maid) for others, and my father was old-fashioned so he left me at home and wanted me to marry early. Getting married was about taking care of him, he was so selfish, he just messed up my chances for my future...I wasn't willing to get married to my husband...My father forced me, he made me so anxious, he hit me and urged me. By winter I was going to jump in the lake, commit suicide, take my own life. My mother was dead, and I didn't have any way out. I jumped in a deep pond, but my uncles came and saved me. My uncle said "look, you are hounding your daughter to death, you are pressuring her all the time."

My father got me engaged at 18. I didn't consent, but there was no way out. My father hit me and yelled at me. It was quite a few years after I was engaged that I got married. My father urged us to get the marriage certificate. Two years after we got it, we got married, and I dragged it out. People said if I kept dragging it out, my husband would be old. My family's conditions weren't good, it would be difficult to get engaged, so what could I do, there was nothing I could do but to get married.

Lin Xia felt so dehumanized and helpless that her only way to resist was to try to commit suicide, and then to delay her marriage. After she got married and had children, her father continued to make her and her husband do all the work, "Every day we had to take care of the kids, feed the pigs, and every day my father would go out to play cards." She understood that she was still treated as an outsider because even though she remained in her natal home, she was not male and hence would not carry on her father's line. After marriage, she felt she had to accept that she again lacked autonomy to make her own decisions, "I had no way out, so I thought I should just accept this as my fate. This influenced my future." This meant that she accepted the responsibility of settling down to be a wife and mother, which also meant sacrificing other possible life avenues. After she and her husband decided to move to her husband's hometown, as her father was too difficult to live with, she remained at home until she was 37, then migrated for work, "now at my older age it's hard to find work, so I migrated out to become a *baomu*." Despite her efforts at resistance, Lin's future prospects were decided when she was still a teenager; she thought there was no hope for her to achieve anything of note. She did not want to talk with me about her prospects, since she can now only do

domestic work, which in other words, holds no prospects. Lin Xia could only hope to contribute to a better future for her children. Many rural women who engage in domestic work express similar sentiments. After her mother's death, Lin suffered a great deal:

I was his (father's) family, I was his daughter but he didn't treat me like a person. He would get drunk, throw money around playing cards and gambling. I was worried every day. I had to live in an environment of enormous pressure...Even when I washed clothes he would yell at me. People said that I was just washing clothes all day. I didn't have any solution, so I just bit by bit endured it, I held out and then after I got married things were a bit better after I moved to my husband's village.

Lin Xia talked about her parents' characters as oppositional; her father had a bad character while her mother was good. Her narratives portray her treatment as immoral, and imply that she did not accept her father's definition of her. I suggest that she was able to survive and continued to resist her father because she considered herself to be on the side of good, like her mother who was also wronged.

Lin Xia also refused to be devalued as a domestic worker. She worked for one family taking care of the elderly grandmother who treated her well and hoped that Lin could stay with her long-term. However, the daughter-in-law was jealous and always picked on her. One day after the daughter-in-law threw a fit, Lin said: "What's going on, I haven't done anything to offend you. I've washed all your clothes except your underwear (which workers are not supposed to wash), and I still haven't satisfied you, so what do you want me to do?" The daughter-in-law responded, "My family has spent money to hire you, so you have to work for us." Lin Xia replied, "yes I am a maid that your family has hired, but I'm not a slave. I do one thing wrong and all day long you say this is wrong, that is wrong, all day long you are rude and sharp-tongued." After arguing, Lin quit and left. The daughter called her, but she refused to return. Lin's response showed she would not accept the servile identity the daughter-in-law sought to impose, and unlike in her youth, this time she had the freedom to assert herself and leave.

Lin Xia also learned the value of care from her mother, who was the most important person in her life during her youth. She cared for Lin and treated her well, not allowing her to do any housework until she herself became sick, at which point Lin had to take over. Lin also knew from her mother that her father was a bad person. Before her

mother died she told their neighbor that her husband has a bad character and if he hit Lin, she was to call others to come help. Lin is now a caring mother, who values girl children. She supported both her children's studies and chose to keep her second pregnancy which was a girl, despite having to pay a 5,000 RMB fine. She shows care for her family, and acts as the supportive, engaged parent she missed after her mother became ill. She also thinks that one should act ethically in caretaking, which includes not hitting or abusing children as her sister did. In this respect she compared her sister's character to their father's. Her sister would hit her children if they did something even a little bit wrong. As if to prove that unethical actions will bring around unfortunate results, she commented that one of her sister's sons did poorly in school, and committed a crime. She said that her sister would probably "educate" her children right into jail. Professionally, Lin appears to have been known for the quality of her care. The daughter of her former elderly employer called her again after a year and a half to ask her to return to care for her mother into her old age.

Lin's current self-image reflects conventional values as a caring and hardworking domestic, and a caring mother, daughter and wife. She has embraced the more positive aspects of her gendered identity and continues to resist the degrading, disempowering aspects attributed to women and domestic workers. The theme of self-determination runs throughout her narrative. Her gender, and of course her father's patriarchal and violent practices, were the greatest factors preventing her from living a more autonomous life. What must it mean to Lin Xia and women like her, to again encounter repressive treatment and discrimination in the workplace? Lin Xia's experience illustrates the extent to which women may have suffered and struggled for their independence and choice, even before becoming a domestic worker.

Suffering as a Woman after Marriage

Tao Lin's narrative takes place after she was married. Both her and Lin Xia's accounts draw out their internal conflicts about how to deal with patriarchal pressure and others' expectations of them as wives or daughters. In addition to needing to earn money, Tao's migration was prompted by her troubled relationships, as it is for many women who want to escape broken marriages and unhappy family relationships. When growing up, Tao did not experience gender discrimination from her family. She was the youngest

and beloved by her parents. Her mother died when she was 19, and her father supported her both in her studies and helped her with her expenses once she was married.

When she was growing up, other local girls usually attended elementary school, however girls' education depended on their families. She herself attended till the third year of middle school. Some of the local families were only willing to let their sons attend because they placed great importance on boys, whereas others allowed both their sons and daughters to attend.

After Tao was married and living in her husband's hometown, she gave birth to a son. Conditions were good; her husband's family had a car and built a house for the couple. When her son was two years old, her husband found another woman:

I couldn't bear it, just couldn't stand it, so we divorced. Two months after we divorced, he married again. With my second husband, we didn't have any *ganqing* (feelings), no foundation of love. I had felt wronged by my first husband...I said I would wait for him...after he married, [but then] I [thought] and others urged me, "what would you do if you waited for him but he didn't come back? Is it [really] ok for you to spend your life like this?"

When Tao first got divorced at age 20, divorce was very uncommon, but she refused to stay with a man who "acted like their home was a hotel," and only came home when he felt like it. Family for her entailed emotional connection. For example, her first husband didn't treat her like family because she wasn't "on his mind or in his heart." With the divorce, her husband also took their son.

[After the divorce] I looked for someone who hadn't married yet...he was four years older than me. After we married, our relations weren't that good, but they weren't terrible. His heart was male...he would drink beer and said, "aiya you married someone else. They didn't want you but I did." He said what was on his mind, he couldn't psychologically deal with it. Sometimes he would feel uncomfortable, he would ignore me and I would talk to him. I said "I married someone else, slept with them, had a child, you know all this. These are the facts. It seems that you are always thinking about me going to bed with another man, but you will never be able to change this. You are just tormenting yourself. I didn't hide the truth from you. If I'd married you and then had told you I had been with someone else, then that would be immoral of me. [In that case] if you killed me then I wouldn't have anything to say [in my defense]." He would come home and get angry with me, [and I would ask] "why must you do this?" That same year I said, "If things aren't working out, let's divorce." He said "others have a wife, I too have a wife." It was also for our child, to show that we are a family, but he still didn't feel right about it...The

two of us were awkward around each other. I migrated out, I wasn't willing to stay at home...It was so much better going out where I wouldn't see anyone [I knew]. I would stay out for a few months to half a year then go home. I would just spend a few days at home then return, which worked great."

After having a positive experience growing up as a girl, Tao Lin realized that institutions like marriage were no guarantee of morality, loyalty or affection. These qualities ironically, are often expected from domestic workers to some degree, by those who employ them. Tao evidently learned from her marriages that in patriarchal relationships she would be punished for deviating from what was expected of a "virtuous" woman. She had learned to cherish herself and thought her own needs were of importance, but her first husband and his family had other expectations. Not only was she subjected to a double standard, as her husband was not expected to stay at home, but Tao learned that she was valued for her reproductive and caring capacity rather than who she was as an individual.

Her second marriage was also shaped by patriarchal expectations, and she was again punished for not being a "virtuous woman." Because she was not "virtuous" she was not "loved" by either husband; there was no *ganqing* (feelings). Possibly in the eyes of her husbands, she failed to fulfill her end of the marriage compact, or what they expected from her as a woman. Regardless of the consequences, she did not regret divorcing her first husband. The situation simply reaffirmed her need to be financially independent. In her second marriage, she also took advantage of the physical separation afforded by migration.

Tao Lin, like Lin Xia, met with great resistance in negotiating her gendered identity, wherein others tried to determine her conditional worth and value. Like Lin Xia, she did not believe she did wrong in resisting patriarchal pressures. In certain situations she stood up for herself, in other contexts she compromised. As a domestic worker, when she encountered difficult situations, sometimes she quit, and sometimes she tried to endure them and stay for longer.

This section has shown to what extent women can be affected by their gender even before commencing their feminized migrant work. Gender discrimination at any stage of life can be demoralizing, commodifying, and dehumanizing; and the gendered expectations of those with authority and power over the women can oppress them, leaving them little choice but to comply. For these women, either the path of compliance or defiance entails loss.

DOMESTIC WORK

This section explores the links between gender and domestic work, how workers perceive domestic work, and their experiences of the devalued domestic worker identity.

Links Between Gender and Domestic Work

Domestic work is seen to mirror the work that women undertake at home, yet fundamental differences exist. The principal difference is that women care for their families as a moral responsibility, whereas they will only do domestic work for others for pay. Because the nature of the work and its content is perceived to be the same or similar, domestic work is not a career that offers a radically different and separate identity from their private identity as women. Their motivation to undertake this similar work for others is mostly to improve their own situation at home. What Maria Jaschok astutely noted of some of her informants who were young married professionals also holds true for domestics, especially for domestic workers who live with their own families and then work in others' homes:

Work is less of a transcendence of domestic orientation than an extension of domestic boundaries to incorporate office, factory or classroom into its site of responsibility. If there is a breakdown in boundaries between public and private worlds it could be argued that women's traditional functions have expanded to serve in their sphere of work too; the implication is not that of a break from the primary sphere.⁷²

This quote is particularly relevant for domestic workers because of the perceived continuity of their work between home and the workplace. Domestic work is also convenient for women who prioritize child-raising, like the part-time workers who choose it so they can take their children to and from school and work at their convenience. Jaschok's point is an important one for understanding the perspective of married domestic workers who migrate to earn money for their families; their self-identity as a worker is intertwined and usually subordinate to that of a mother and a wife.

The cultural and historical feminization of domestic work in northern China is linked to gender, as housework and carework are considered to be women's work. It is therefore also what the women believe they are good at, as Beverly Skeggs detailed in her discussion of women who signed up for continuing education courses in caring:

⁷² Ibid., 119.

The decision to go on a caring course is not so much a positive decision, as an attempt to find something within constricting cultural and financial limits which they will be able to do and be good at. Caring is something at which they are unlikely to fail. It is a cultural resource to which they have (and had) access. It is a form of cultural capital.⁷³

This accurately describes the rationale for rural women to become domestic workers. Women's early socialization into caring and cleaning means that they are assumed to possess the aptitude for domestic work. Their lack of other marketable skills leaves them reliant upon this aptitude for care.

Gender also plays a major role in the biases against those who undertake this low-status work, whether they are female or male, because of the low value associated with this form of women's work. In my prior two year research project which started in 2005, I and my volunteers interviewed approximately 20 male domestic workers, who were difficult to locate because of their very limited number. These workers spoke of employers' preference for female workers. The men also felt that women were more suited to housework and were more detail-oriented, although the male workers also cooked and cared for their elderly charges. They understood that men were not very welcome as domestics. It is usually considered to be appropriate work for men when a family has a heavy or disabled person and needs a "man's strength" to move them. However despite the bias towards female domestic workers, they felt there was discrimination against domestic work as a profession. Therefore, male workers can experience discrimination as migrants, as men in a feminized profession, and as domestic workers.

My female informants often share similar experiences as women and as domestic workers in terms of their social location, the expectations for them to possess certain ethical attributes, and their experiences of gender discrimination or subordination. Just as many women are still expected to exhibit certain virtues like a lack of prior sexual history before marriage, and to care and sacrifice for their families, workers are also expected to show caring and sacrifice by enduring hardships for their employers and to demonstrate virtues such as trustworthiness and obedience. Those who have been victims of gender discrimination or subordination as women or workers share an inferior social position and may have experienced significant constraints on their decision-making, having been expected to obey what their fathers, husbands or

⁷³ Beverley Skeggs, "Developing and Monitoring a Caring Self " in *Formations of Class & Gender* (London, UK: Sage Publications, 1997), 58.

employers told them to do, even if it went against their interests. The roles of women and domestic workers can be associated with a lack of opportunity and social, economic and political mobility.

Domestic workers are expected to be maternal but not feminine, and both caring and careful. One worker commented on not having the money to buy makeup in order to look feminine but also said, “We do domestic work, we are laborers, there’s no point.” Employers who pay for carework rather than just cleaning, pay and therefore expect workers to act maternal and demonstrate care whether or not they emotionally care for their charges. This is another marked difference between carework at home and as work. Women do not need to emotionally care for their employers’ families, but must act as though they do. However, many women also find it easy to come to care for their charges.

Known for her professional care and care for her family, Lin Xia was even able to demonstrate care for her father, despite the fact that he had been her single largest source of suffering. According to Lin, her father lived alone, ate poorly since he was a man and so didn’t know how to cook, and developed stomach cancer. When he was dying she and her sister returned to take care of him, each for two weeks at a time. He died when she was caring for him.

He was alone. I still cared for him, I was still concerned about him, and before he died he said that I was good. But everything [else] he said was rotten and with a sharp tongue. Actually I still think that my father did not have a good character. My mother had a good character. He often swore at her, and he didn’t love her because she didn’t provide a son for him.

Lin Xia’s sense of familial obligation, as well as pity overcame her aversion to her father. Obligation to employers’ families for domestic workers is constructed through financial ties rather than through kinship, but both may require the ability to *renshou* (to endure).

Cai is a stressed hourly worker from Hunan who advocates for herself when exploited. She mentioned that female domestic workers have maternal qualities, and suggested that what they do in the household is more comprehensive than what male workers would do.

For example, in regards to children, I think that female domestic workers are closer, like mothers, when they come home you have food ready to eat,

whereas there isn't such a warm feeling with a man in the house... If the woman is in the house, she cooks and makes sure everything gets done. It's not the same as having a man in the kitchen.

Certain qualities and responsibilities rather than refined skills are transferred from workers' experiences as women to their work. This is partly because skills required in the city may be different from those practiced in the countryside, such as how to clean a surface covered with fragile decorative objects. In the city workers have to adjust to what the clients want, and how they want things done. It may be worth adding here that while workers may have experienced the effects of patriarchy at the hands of their family or rural community, in domestic work it is mostly other women who subordinate them. It is common for women in both rural and urban areas to take the responsibility for managing their household, and in the case of urban employers, this includes managing the domestics. The workers are expected to dedicate themselves to improving the well-being of their employers' families. They are in the awkward position of being expected to be maternal and caring, as though their employer's family was their own, even though they are only working for money and know that their relations could end at any time with their dismissal.

Perspectives on Domestic Work

Domestic workers have varying positive and negative perspectives on their profession. Financial hardship has driven most to domestic work rather than passion for it as a career. The first advantage of domestic work is the ease-of-entry for workers who possess few skills and who are older. Tao Lin, who was 45, commented on the practice of age discrimination in work:

You know some work units, if you are older, they don't employ you, and if you are married they don't employ you. Some employ married women, but just those under 35. I think it's hard to find work. You see, doing domestic work, this also depend on your age. At this age, what [else] can you do?

Despite her lack of choice, Tao expressed respect for her line of work and believed that one should care for children and elderly charges with compassion, treating them like your own family. She also appreciated the independence it afforded her, and thinks it is important for women to move beyond the home and become involved in the public sphere in their own right.

I think I'm a free worker. This is not like wage earners, the level of people who earn wages who are subject to, for example, the control of factories. I think I've become a free worker, I'm self-employed. So if I want to work in your home, I can. If I don't want to work there, if you haven't fired me but I don't want to work [in your home], then I don't have to.

Women should be independent. One should be able to say that one can stand up on one's own, independently, to learn some skills. If you have skills then you are alright. Then you can slowly, slowly acquire your own career. You will have a footing.

Domestic workers can view the work they do in various ways. They can see domestic work as part of their gendered identity; that they are women who take care of others and the household. They could also take pride in their resourcefulness and ability to endure hardships (*chi ku*), or they could view it as a profession that permits independence and choice as Tao Lin does.

Other workers reveal a predominantly negative view of the work, but choose it because of its low level of financial investment (fees paid to the intermediary agency) and risk and usually regular and reliable wages. The members of a focus group agreed, "actually none of us are willingly in this line of work." Zhou Cao, one of the workers added, "We have a heavy burden, above us we have our elders [to take care of] and below us we have our children."

Zhen expressed hesitation about experimenting with other types of work. Quite a few of the workers had tried other types of jobs, including a few who failed at small business ventures:

Doing this domestic work profession, some days I think I really don't want to do it, I want to do a type of job that I like, but the wages are really good, so I'm loathe to stop. If I do the type of work I want to do, then in one fell swoop I'd be earning less wages, and would be afraid that it would end badly. I'm not willing to take on those risks.

Zhang Shufen similarly found the advantages to be financial, but mentioned the costs which are physical and psychological:

Doing this line of work, if you want to talk about advantages, it is fine doing hourly work or live-in work as long as you put forward effort, then you will have some reward. You will be able to raise your standard of living a bit. As for disadvantages, you will certainly experience discrimination from many people, you will have to watch their faces (facial expressions), a lot of people will look at you with discrimination. They will discriminate against you

verbally, and you will physically have to put up with hardships, that's for sure. Physical labor definitely requires suffering some hardships, but that's natural, I think that's how it has to be.

For Tao Lin, domestic work is relational, focused on her care for families, and at some level it offers the chance to be free from hierarchy, command and control, relative to other jobs. Zhang on the other hand, sees the negative side of the relational aspects of work, where she is subordinated by others.

Devaluation of the Domestic Worker Identity

Once they start domestic work, many female migrants struggle with the change in attitude that is frequently expected in the profession. Rural migrants are not only considered to be part of the lowest social class in the city, but domestic work itself holds inferior status compared to many other types of migrant work. They come to realize that they are entering into a situation of inequality. Public perceptions about domestic work, even among migrants, often send the message that this form of service work is demeaning, of low value, a cause for embarrassment, and questionable if one serves men.

Hui Feng, who started domestic work recently, already felt embarrassed by it. Within her larger group of migrant peers, domestic work was evidently devalued. She quickly realized that the domestic worker identity connotes low status, "A lot of friends ask me what I'm doing, and I don't dare reply. I used to sell clothes, you know. I'm just a working sister." She now feels lower status, and this makes her feel more emotional. She contrasted this sentiment with how she felt when she worked at a supermarket. The fact that she did not feel low-status when working as a cashier suggests that she saw herself as participating in the economy of popular consumption; as possessing the skills to sell items to consumers. However, the identity of the domestic worker in a household is marked by difference. As Annelies Moors notes, "employers have to tackle the issue of how to incorporate domestic workers into the family household while simultaneously excluding them."⁷⁴ Domestic workers are there to serve the family. The hourly domestic worker Yi Ding identified domestic workers as *xiadeng ren*, a lower class of people. She recounted a story in which she and other hourly workers on a group job were

⁷⁴ Annelies Moors, "Migrant Domestic Workers: Debating Transnationalism, Identity Politics, and Family Relations," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 2 (2003): 290.

wrongly accused of causing a water leak, after which they were not paid. The workers felt both wronged and dehumanized, “the idea was to treat us as though we weren’t people.”

Tao also understood the association of domestic work with loss of dignity, although she disagreed with it: “back at home people are poor, but they still really want to keep face. Doing domestic work one risks gossip, because gossip will spread if you serve a man.” She thought that people should realize that they are serving elderly men, who should be treated like family. She provided the example of *huli* (private male nurses) in hospitals who care for females as well as males. Tao’s recognition of the gendered stigma and double standards pertaining to female domestic work reflects her other observations about the double standards for women in general, particularly in the countryside. Her statement also shows the importance of conforming to what is conventionally and morally acceptable; veering too far from this norm put one’s reputation at risk.

These examples suggest that associating with the domestic worker identity can cause women to feel differently about themselves. There are new feelings of shame and inferiority, and the purportedly low value of their work likely makes it more difficult to take pride in their job. Cai continued in the same vein, raising the issue of money and inequality:

Just doing this thing which is domestic work gives us more thoughts and feelings. When you go to other people’s homes to do work, you get the feeling you are lower than them. Before I had never done domestic work, I didn’t have to watch out for people’s facial expressions, and now I have to consider the looks on their faces...Before, I and others were equal, [but now] they have money that is theirs, and I don’t.

The next few accounts address the low value of domestic work, which is connected to the low value of the worker. One worker Luo, commented on how little domestic work is valued:

If you are a person, you have value. Whatever sort of work you do, they all have value that counts as high or low. With domestic work, the value is pretty low. I think that the grain the peasants grow is of the greatest value. If society didn’t have grain, how would they live?

Luo’s opinion reflects the low public valuation of domestics, although arguably, cleaning and carework are arguably as essential to society as grain.

Yi Ding's employer offered her a pear to eat after she'd worked for an hour without drinking anything. When it was time to pay Yi, her client said she'd pay for two hours. Yi said she thought it was closer to two and a half hours. The client said that she'd pay for two hours, plus Yi had eaten her pear. Yi's account reflects her indignation at the woman's pettiness and poor treatment. Afterwards when the woman called to apologize and admitted that Yi had worked over ten minutes extra, Yi said that it wasn't so much the money that mattered, but that the client decided a pear was worth over ten minutes of her work. When fruit like pears, which indicate employers' expensive consumption habits, are withheld or given at a price, they come to represent the social difference between employers and their workers; underlining workers' comparative lack of worth. The pear also indicated the nature of their labor relationship. Yi had thought the client had offered the pear as a sign of appreciation or recognition of her hard work, but the client did not consider her to be a sufficiently worthy recipient.

The final example of the devalued and dehumanizing domestic worker identity comes from Tao, who recounted one experience with a former employer. The wife was over 40 and was being treated for bone cancer. Tao had to cook although the wife's sense of taste had changed as a result of the medical treatment. After she and her husband finished eating one day, Jiao ate. The woman came over and said, "you know what you are eating? Shit." Tao felt very ill at ease. The woman worked in insurance and certification of diamonds, so Tao felt that she should have higher *suzhi* (quality), and not say such horrible words. One day during Tao's breakfast, she came and told Tao to wash the curtains. Although Tao was still eating, she got up to soak and wash the curtains, in order to avoid any problems. After she was done eating, her employer told her to follow her and took her to the bus stop and then to the housekeeping agency, without informing her why. It wasn't open, so they went back to the house where Jiao overheard her call the agency again and ask for a new domestic worker. Tao felt so hurt, as she was still working in the home. Her employer told the agency that Tao couldn't cook, which was not true. Tao decided to leave, but without causing a fuss, so she artfully recast her statement to reflect the employer's need for someone who can cook well, so that she could recover from her illness. Tao was literally being "returned" as though she were a purchase that the consumer found to be unsatisfactory. She was not consulted; her thoughts and feelings were seen to be irrelevant.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that in the Chinese context many domestic workers' lives have been adversely affected by how they are treated as women, who they are expected to be as daughters, mothers and wives, and what they are expected to do. Their rural experiences and identities set them apart from urbanites and mark them as inferior, but make them preferable as subordinates who can be molded to their employers' liking. For example, the women identify themselves as simple, honest and average people who "can't speak" (or speak back) and who will *ren* or *renshou* (endure) difficult situations. They are also disadvantaged in terms of education, wealth and resources, and their lack of urban *hukou*. Given this context, *zhongnan qingnü*, the privileging of males over females, has affected rural women and their opportunities to a greater degree. Migrant women often feel they have no choice but to engage in the work that they have been socialized to do. Their work is therefore often one of sacrifice, since as mothers they are expected to adopt a double burden and sacrifice their own prospects and self-development to provide for their children, and because of their poverty and lack of qualifications, they see no feasible alternatives for work. Since they often experience subordination as migrant domestic workers, many of the women understand that their subordination is based on the type of work they do. Some also realize that it is due to their low status, rurality, and level or class in urban society. Their social difference is articulated through subordination which slights, dehumanizes, and devalues the workers. They feel indignant at being treated as though they were less than fully human, yet it is a struggle to disassociate themselves from their devalued identity.

There are a few beneficial points of comparison between what is considered to be women's domestic work in the private sphere and in the public sphere: moral obligation, degree of autonomy, and caring feelings and actions. The women's accounts have suggested that mothers and wives have a moral obligation to care for their families. Perceived failures in mothering can come at a cost, as with Tao Lin who was criticized by locals for working, then divorced her husband after refusing to give up her job and refusing to accept his affair, and then lost access to her son. Women's "failure" to care can take a toll on their families, impact their maternal identity and conscience, and generate gossip within the local community. Domestic workers on the other hand have a minor moral obligation to avoid breaking their contracts prematurely and without notice, but they can do so if they wish and pay the monetary penalty. If they break contracts frequently, they will earn a poor reputation for reliability with their agency, and they

will be given less and less work. Overall, the degree of moral obligation for workers is significantly lower than that of mothers. However, they also feel social pressure to perform their work conscientiously and to provide good quality care. So although money is the central motivation for professional domestic work, I suggest that both workers and employers view caring as carrying over from domestics' lives as women, into the workplace.

The second point of comparison is about the articulation of care. Women demonstrate care for their families through both emotions and actions, whereas domestic workers mostly demonstrate care through solicitous actions, and do not necessarily care emotionally for their employers. They replicate actions of caring that appear the same as those performed at home, such as feeding an invalid. These acts might seem to be identical, but carework in someone else's home can involve a pretense of caring, and even a masking of their genuine emotions. The third point is that both care and cleaning at home are up to the woman herself, she only has to meet her own and her husband's standards. Cleaning and caretaking in other people's homes are no longer autonomous acts; they must meet others' standards. In caring for others, women are often excluded from their own care. Hourly domestic workers make many sacrifices for their families, such as eating cheap food to save money, sustaining injuries from repetitive work, and wearing themselves down by working long hours. Rural motherhood and urban domestic work in this sense are mutually reinforcing: both promote selflessness and a focus on others. My informants are caught between the many ethical burdens that they bear as women, their multiple disempowering devalued identities, and the glimpses of socio-political consciousness that emerge from their stories of abuse, discrimination and dehumanization. This chapter has demonstrated what their gender and gendered subordination have meant for many rural women, and how they have shaped the women's lives from birth through childhood, marriage, motherhood and finally their choice of paid domestic work.

CHAPTER 3

POWER, SUBORDINATION AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

PART I INTRODUCTION TO POWER AND SUBORDINATION

The last chapter demonstrated the potency of gendered norms and discrimination against women, rural female migrants, and their feminized work, and explored the interplay between gender, identity, and subordination. A gender lens was adopted to examine the subordination that many women have experienced since childhood, up to and including their current feminized work. This chapter shifts the focus from socio-cultural underpinnings of subordination to the socio-political, in order to explore power relations in the workplace and the socio-political impact of subordination. It responds to my research questions from a power perspective, exploring how subordination operates as a form of “power over” domestic workers, and how it shapes their experiences in the workplace, including its deliberate and unintended effects.⁷⁵ I address the question of how labor and deference are extracted from workers without engendering significant resistance or exit. I start by asking two sets of questions that are key to analyzing subordination, and which correspond to the following two sections of this chapter.

- 1) What values or beliefs are involved that legitimize subordination?
What socio-structural factors enable subordination to be successful?
Which direct forms of subordination do workers experience in the workplace?
- 2) How does subordination operate effectively to obtain compliance?
How does subordination impact workers psychologically, as well as their behavior and attitudes?
How does subordination affect how workers see themselves and their social location?

In this introduction, I will explain my definition of power and subordination and present an illustrative case study that captures some of the forms and dynamics of power over workers and its effects. In Part II, I will discuss the underpinnings of power which

⁷⁵ As my dissertation focuses on domestic workers' subordination, the accounts in this chapter are only from informants who experienced subordination. As noted in Chapter 1, there are many employers who treat their workers decently, however most workers I interviewed had experienced subordination in the workplace at some point.

legitimize subordination, and the forms of subordination that employers exercise directly over workers, which range from criticism to deprivation to bodily control. In Part III, I will discuss a more subtle form of subordination, and reveal how various machinations of power over workers' bodies and minds are used to assert control over them and their labor, and to keep them in their place. I also address subordination's effects on workers which range from eliciting deferential behavior to affecting workers' socio-political consciousness and identities.

This dissertation addresses the different forms of workers' subordination, its socio-political origins, and in particular, how subordination is manifested, how it functions effectively, and how it influences workers and their responses. Investigating the socio-political origins of subordination necessitates an examination of the influential beliefs, norms, discourses, and practices concerning women, domestic workers, and rural migrants. Patriarchy, *zhongnan qingnü*, historical female servitude, and commodification; class difference and belief in the inferiority of migrant domestic workers; and discourses such as *chi ku*, all contribute to the practice of subordination and its legitimization. Subordination emerges from and serves to reinforce inequality and difference between rural migrant domestics and urban citizens. It is also borne from the desire to exert power over workers or to profit from them by extracting additional labor, or deference, obedience, and silence.

I have adopted the term "subordination," because its broad meaning encompasses a wide range of acts against my informants, and it simultaneously serves to remind one of the unequal power relations that are established or recreated in the act of being subordinated. However, depending on the context, I also use the terms subordinating power, power over, exploitation, discrimination, dehumanization, oppression, mistreatment, *zhongnan qingnü*, monitoring and control, and immorality. "Subordinating power" and "power over" are used in the context of power relations. I refer to "oppression" in my discussion of Freirean theory, in describing oppression of groups, and the development of "self-oppression." Exploitation, mistreatment, and monitoring and control all convey the particular forms that subordination takes. The terms *zhongnan qingnü*, discrimination, and dehumanization reveal the perspectives of those who subordinate, and their belief in the inferiority of women and migrant domestic workers. The term "immorality" on the other hand, implies that the workers themselves believe their subordination to be immoral and unjust. In this chapter, I describe specific forms of subordination practiced in the workplace, a key mechanism

of subordination, and how it effectively elicits compliance. The effects of subordination which are explored throughout the dissertation include: its psychological impact, changes in workers' responses, a change in behavior and attitudes towards those who subordinate them, a change in their perspective about their situation and their available space for change, a change in self and imposed identities, and shifts in gender awareness and socio-political consciousness.

It would first be helpful to define which part of the continuum of power is relevant to this study. Unless stated otherwise, "power" refers to "power over," which both reminds us of the factors that legitimize workers' subordination (which gives someone "power over" others), and refers to employers' power which is directly exercised over the workers. I will use the term "subordination," and sometimes "subordinating power," or "power," when I describe the actual exercise of power over workers. "Power over" refers to a relationship of inequality which in the case of domestic workers is based on labor relations, wealth, gender, class and rural-urban difference. Sometimes power remains implicit and unexercised, as in Steven Lukes' reference to power as a potentiality.⁷⁶ However, because of its close association with action, I do not just define power as a potentiality. Rather, power is a resource that can be exercised or not, it exists in one's relation to others, it can be gained and lost, and one may not even realize that one has power and is complicit in subordinating others. At one end of the spectrum, this power does not necessarily entail force or intentional subjugation and may not even be used to reap desired outcomes. However if it is derived from a belief in the inferiority of the other and is acted upon, then it still subordinates. Power over workers is frequently achieved through subordination, which can range from blatant to subtle. Subordination sends a message about what the dominant person thinks of the other and expects from them, and it eliminates assumptions about equality. Acts of subordination are one way to assert power and authority over others, both in order to establish and highlight unequal power relations and to benefit from them. I am most interested in the subtle form of subordination, which can be both ubiquitous and disguised. Various theorists refer to this form of power as disciplinary power and normalization, invisible or internalized power, tactical power, and structural power.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Steven Lukes, "Power and the Battle for Hearts and Minds," *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (2005): 478.

⁷⁷ Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*; Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*; Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*; Wolf, *Envisioning Power*; Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990).

Dehumanization, which overlaps with the commodification of human beings, is a part of many workers' experiences of subordination. Because of commonplace social norms and beliefs about low-status domestics, certain employers feel that the workers are inferior or that their feelings and opinions are inconsequential. These employers consequently can act in a manner that disregards workers' humanity, dignity, basic needs and feelings, and in a way that is intended to extract extra labor. Workers' accounts express the disempowering and demeaning aspects of dehumanization, which often take a toll on how they see and feel about themselves.

Discrimination is also one of the avenues through which subordination takes shape. It can be conveyed through critical and disparaging comments and tones of voice, commands, privation, and attempts to take advantage of the workers. Some workers understand the cause of dehumanizing and discriminatory treatment to be individualized, arising from their relationship with a particular employer, and from their different respective personalities and habits. Others understand this behavior as a systematic practice aimed at poor, rural, lower-class domestic workers. Their socio-political consciousness is in large part derived from these personal experiences and those of their peers.

Tang Ming mentioned some of the acts she considers discrimination:

Some people don't like you to use water, like to wash your clothes. If you are a live-in worker, then you will certainly need to change and wash your clothes. I want to change my clothes because we perspire when we work, and especially with our jobs, we need to change frequently. They thought it was a waste of water and wouldn't let me use a basin. This counts as discrimination. There is also verbal discrimination, discrimination having to do with food, generally not letting you use water, monitoring you, not letting you use other [household] items, and being overly suspicious of you. They may not maltreat you regarding your food, and they may not abuse you verbally, but there is always some discrimination, it's just a matter of how deep or superficial.

Although she is educated, well-dressed and articulate, Tang Ming has shared some of the same experiences as other rural workers. Being treated with suspicion and denied basic acts of dignity are forms of discrimination linked to the stigma of their rural background and the work they do. Tang Ming's account gives examples of workers' subordination, but does not provide enough theoretical clues as to how power works within their labor relations. The remainder of this chapter will extensively explore the process of subordination from its origins to its effects on domestic workers.

Illustration of a Worker's Power Relations

Su is a live-in domestic worker from Henan who was hired to care for an elderly senile woman whom she referred to as “grandmother” in our interviews, and who could not move on her own. However, Su also cared for the husband and ended up cooking for their adult children, which included four dishes at lunch. The older daughter, a laid-off worker who returned home to attend to her mother, managed and dispensed her parents’ money. She regretted that they had signed a contract to pay Su 2000 RMB per month, and 300 RMB for continuing to work through her four monthly rest days. The family was purportedly concerned about her safety, so paid her to work instead of letting her go out one day each week. Su felt that her salary was not unreasonable since she had to care for someone who could not move on her own or communicate. However, the daughter resented Su for her high wages, and constantly ordered her around. Acknowledging the daughter’s issues, Su told her that she’d do exactly as ordered. She said she cared for the invalid grandmother’s every need, and even washed and turned her every two hours to prevent bedsores. She may have undertaken this on her own initiative, because the last worker did not turn her regularly, resulting in serious bedsores. As a voluntary gesture to save the household money, Su also did not wear a facemask or disposable gloves when she changed the grandmother’s diapers.

The day that Su was to spend a few hours with me for a follow-up interview before I left for Australia, the grandmother contracted a fever. The family told her not to leave, although they had previously given her permission. Having already rescheduled with me several times, Su told them that they could dock her wages. The daughter employed guilt in accusing Su of going out to have fun while grandmother was sick. Su described her pleas to leave as doing all but kneeling down on the ground to ask them to allow her to go. After *yeye* (grandfather) gave her permission to leave, the daughter refused to take care of her mother, and slammed the door after Su walked out. With the exception of the grandfather, the other family members seem to believe they were entitled to exert control over Su’s schedule and personal life. Nonetheless, in recounting her interactions with the family, Su took a firm position of her own, knowing that she was doing the best she could for the family. She still grappled with anger and resentment, but refused to retaliate, although she had imagined slapping the old lady to whom she was in servitude.

I use Su’s account as a preface to a broader and more detailed discussion of subordination and its impact. By giving Su such a large share of work and

responsibilities, despite the presence of the daughter who could have shared in the caretaking, her employers fully utilized her labor. By effectively mechanizing Su, through micro-managing her work and how she carried it out, the daughter used her power to remove alternatives. Su confessed she felt like a robot after being constantly ordered around and monitored. When the grandmother moaned during the night, Su was made to stay up to massage her feet. Su lacked autonomy since she had no leeway to work in her own way, but had to carefully follow commands as though she were a worker in an assembly line. Su did receive permission from the grandfather to meet me, but her persistence may have emerged from feelings of frustration and psychological oppression after putting up with the daughter's monitoring and control.

Su's general compliance is an example of subordinating power that disciplines. She chose to turn the grandmother over frequently and to save the household money by not using sanitary gloves. She also mentioned that because the daughter considered her wages to be too high, she used her free time to work and clean. Su told me, "While in their home, I have a genuine and sincere desire to treat them well," and alluding to the daughter who picked on her daily, she declared, "I will use my actions to move you emotionally; however you want to talk then [go ahead and] talk that way." While claiming that she was there to earn money, Su's words show that she had chosen to simultaneously take the higher moral road while continuing to submit to oppressive treatment. Showing no disgust while dealing with the old woman's frailties and cleaning her bodily waste was a sign of strength and compassion for Su, although from a perspective of power analysis, such work could be considered demeaning and a mark of her lowly status. Su had decided that submitting to her employer's family would touch them. This idea was substantiated by the grandfather who told her he was touched that such a young woman could really *chi ku* (endure hardships). Su's actions however were not unsolicited. She knew that her behavior, which resulted from an intersection of duty and domination, would please her employers.

Su chose to act ethically by treating the family well, although she was sometimes tempted to act otherwise. Yihui Su, who writes about domestic worker-employer relations, states: "The self-development ideology persuades domestic workers to gain even higher *suzhi* through carrying out their professional ethics, but domestic workers

unconsciously give up their control over the labor process.”⁷⁸ The factors contributing to domestic workers’ lack of power can be far more complex than a focus on ethical behavior in order to improve their quality (*suzhi*), and they may be quite aware of their loss of control. For example, people like Su may not submit, behave morally or put so much effort into unrewarding and demeaning relationships, if they felt they had a better choice. Su recognized both the physical and emotional costs of her compliance. She was not just conditioned by her own response to oppression, meaning that her acceptance of the subordination did not become normalized because of her routine submission; there were also other factors at work. Her life was in turmoil; her marriage was marked by control and abuse and she feared for her children’s future. Su, as do all people, also has limits. She wanted to leave this job, and wanted to divorce her husband, but did not see herself as having better options. Because Su knew that her graceful submission could reap rewards, her actions can be considered as calculated submission. But such actions are also not transformative; they serve to further enable the oppressor, and the worker remains in the same subordinated position. In fact, when a worker chooses this path of virtuous behavior and submission, it may indicate that she does not think it is expedient or perhaps even possible to resist, and habitually choosing to submit will likely make it even harder to eventually resist.

PART II EXPLORING THE FORMS OF SUBORDINATION

IDEOLOGY AND INSTITUTIONALIZED POWER IN LABOR RELATIONS

Power over domestic workers is embedded in social norms, structures, and dominant ideologies, and is institutionalized within the labor relationship. Dominant individuals act in response to these understandings about the Other’s identity, social location and relations, and can exert their social, economic and political power over them to obtain desired outcomes. Urban citizens of means have greater access to symbolic and substantive power and authority than most rural migrants. One way of referring to this power is through the “domestic service regime,” a term Xinying Hu uses to link modes of production and social relations such as patriarchy in her analysis.⁷⁹ Because of the

⁷⁸ Yihui Su, “Kongzhi yu Dikang: Guzhu yu Jiazhenggong zai Jiawulaodong Guocheng Zhong de Boyi” (Labor Control and Resistance: The Dynamics between Employers and Domestic Workers in the Domestic Labor Process), *Shehui (Society)* 6, no. 31 (2011): 202.

⁷⁹ Hu, *China’s New Underclass*: 19-20.

ubiquity and ingrained nature of power, the dominant may not realize to what extent their actions are affected by social influences. Jethro Pettit refers to post-structuralist approaches to power such as Cynthia Hayward's, which focus on the location of power in forms of knowledge, social norms and boundaries rather than in the actors themselves.⁸⁰ In examining domestic workers' subordination, it is indeed necessary to directly study how different domestic workers respond to being subordinated. One should also examine the social forces that contribute to their low status and lack of power, and how workers respond to the norms and understandings captured in their labor relations.

Paul Farmer extensively integrates the notion of structural violence into his work, which lays bare the connections between the social axes of oppression and the violence that is visited upon the poor. He describes structural violence broadly as "a host of offensives against human dignity: extreme and relative poverty, social inequalities ranging from racism to gender inequality, and the more spectacular forms of violence that are uncontestedly human rights abuses, some of them punishment for efforts to escape structural violence."⁸¹ He emphasizes the importance of understanding the historical roots of the inequality which is so tightly linked to structural violence, yet which often has been erased, minimized or forgotten.⁸² Farmer's lamented erasure of historical memory obfuscates the links between those who have suffered and those who are currently the beneficiaries of the violence.⁸³ Domestic workers reverse this "erasure" by coming to recognize the connection between the causes of inequities, their oppression, and their oppressors. Domestic workers' individual socio-political consciousness recognizes at least in part the connection between the causes such as their rural origins and *hukou*, poverty, gender, and domestic work; and their vulnerability to being demeaned, exploited, discriminated against, and treated as less than fully human by urban citizens.

⁸⁰ Jethro Pettit, "Power and Pedagogy: Learning for Reflective Development Practice," *IDS Bulletin* 37, no. 6 (2006): 72.

⁸¹ Paul Farmer, *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 8.

⁸² ———, "An Anthropology of Structural Violence," *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 3 (2004): 308-09.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 307.

History of Female Servitude and Commodification

The ideology of gendered servitude which still permeates the norms and expectations for modern day Chinese domestics and helps legitimize subordination, has been influenced by China's history of slavery and paid female domestic labor. In the late 19th and early 20th century, it was widely considered acceptable for men to make decisions about selling their children in the case of dire poverty, or for wealthy men to buy servants or concubines.⁸⁴ Subject to familial patriarchy, children and women lacked autonomy and were sometimes treated as little more than commodities. Girls and women from impoverished families were often sold in times of need as slave girls, child domestic servants (*mui tsai*), and betrothed children. Particularly the former two could then be pawned or resold or end up as concubines or prostitutes. Although outlawed, there were still girls being sold as child domestics in the 1950s. Once a *mui tsai*, they were frequently treated as non-persons, and were often mistreated and exploited. Their masters' control was virtually absolute; the girls lived, worked, slept and ate at their masters' whim.⁸⁵ Concepts and stereotypes about domestic workers' value, status, appropriate treatment and commodification still live on.

The circumstances and status of women up till the Maoist era depended on their class and fortune. With wealth, women could have power over others even though they were still subordinate to their husbands, whereas purchased servants lost what little claim they had to their autonomy. Class, denoted by social position and wealth, indicated whether one was the objectifier or the objectified. Sarah Paddle suggested that for those like Kathleen Simon, an activist against female child slavery in the 1920s and 1930s, "the Chinese slave carries the oppression and humiliation and loss of identity and freedom common to all slaves as a class."⁸⁶ Just as "representations of servants and their oppression are still among the most poignant hallmarks of the class injustice of the 'old society,'" ⁸⁷ some workers I interviewed still complain that they are like *yongren* (servants). Whether women were servants or slaves, they both shared a subordinate position and expectations for servitude. Although domestic workers are now autonomous individuals, they may feel this connection to the past once they enter the

⁸⁴ Maria Jaschok, and Suzanne Miers, ed. *Women and Chinese Patriarchy: Submission, Servitude and Escape* (New Jersey: Zed Books, 1994), 11-15, 142.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 5, 11-12, 126-27.

⁸⁶ Sarah Paddle, "The Limits of Sympathy: International Feminists and the Chinese 'slave girl' Campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s " *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 4, no. 3 (2003): 7.

⁸⁷ Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*: 19.

workplace. As my informant Tang said, “we can bring up the past, because when all is said and done, you are [still] a servant. You are a maid.”

As a contemporary comparison, workers in factories also sell their labor as a commodity, and many are similarly subject to the micro-management of their time, living conditions and daily work as well as poor treatment by their superiors. The difference lies in how domestic work is valued, and in the expectations for deference and emotional labor, which approach the historical commodification of servants. Employers’ subordinating actions are influenced both by their understanding of labor as a commodity and enduring beliefs about gender, class and domestic work which commodify; a double commodification. Employers who possess this perspective often perceive workers in terms of their labor, rather than as individuals with subjectivity who sell their valued labor. This perspective can lead to subordinating behavior that dehumanizes workers. As one of my informants said, “When we do domestic work for others it seems like we are one level lower (inferior), it’s like we are their slaves.”

Another domestic worker named Ming provides an insight into how some employers think about workers and treat them. “If Chinese people spend money, then you (domestic workers) are just like those servants from a prior age. You are the servants of the house, and you have to do all of the housework.” This means that if the employers see themselves as having bought the worker’s labor (and ostensibly the worker), they are entitled to her full efforts and time. From this perspective, the “ownership” or hiring of the worker is what counts, not the amount of work. If the employer views the worker as “belonging” to the household like a servant, then she should do all the work, no matter how much there is. In the eyes of these employers, their demands are not really immoral; these are their expectations for the migrant women once they are contracted for work. However from the perspective of workers, some employers’ demands are tantamount to exploitation.

Institutionalized Vulnerabilities within Labor Relations

Domestic workers in China understand that their work is generally characterized by a highly unequal power relationship, that is, those who pay their wages exert the most control over determining the scope and content of their daily work, and often of their daily lives. Their lack of power is institutionalized within their power relations with

their employers and housekeeping agency. Domestic work is also insecure for various reasons: jobs may be one time only or short term, it is relatively easy for employers to dismiss workers or to violate the spirit or parameters of the labor contract, and the work tends to be so poorly paid that workers struggle to make a good living. Workers by and large are responsible for solving their own workplace issues. Although they can report problems to the housekeeping agency if it is an intermediary in the labor relationship, workers learn from experience that complaints are not encouraged; self-sufficiency is. Even if agencies are sympathetic towards workers, they have no way to enforce penalties if employers break their terms of contract or mistreat workers, besides assigning fines or refusing to provide more workers. Although agencies are supposed to act as go-betweens, according to workers, they commonly leave them to resolve issues or settle disputes in favor of the higher paying clients, the employers. Lin's account demonstrates how domestics are ultimately on their own:

Some employers are just [bad]. Those of us who go to work have no control over things and just have to let them go, because the money is in their hands. If the client isn't willing to pay you [what was agreed upon] and reprimands you, you can go to the agency, and they can handle it. If you don't go to the agency, then what can you do? You can just take whatever you can get, and leave. [However] when the agency goes to handle it, they speak in favor of them (the clients). They say, if the service wasn't good, then let's settle accounts, or if the worker didn't do a good job, we'll find you a better one next time. That's how they commonly resolve it. They can't say that the employer is no good; they can only say that the service personnel aren't good. The boss of the agency says you cannot offend clients.

Rather than involving the agency when an employer complains, a worker will often not verbally defend the fact that she did a good job, but may instead remain silent or repeat her work, since "talking back" increases the risk of employer dissatisfaction and withholding payment.

The power of those who hire domestic workers is derived from the informal labor contract, whereby money is remitted for work. I use this term "informal labor contract" to represent the situation of paid domestic workers, both with and without written contracts, who have an understanding with their clients about their work, hours and pay. Written labor contracts vary in usefulness, but it is up to employers whether or not they want to adhere to the contract terms. The labor contract is mostly used for live-in and full-time workers, whereas hourly workers who do one-time jobs do not have a signed contract with employers. After the work is done, hourly workers may have clients sign a

slip for the agency, writing down the hours worked and pay. Many live-in domestic workers prefer contracts because they at least offer some protection, whereas workers without contracts or who find work without the help of an agency cannot prove that they were hired, nor their agreed upon hours or wages. If the police are called in, contracts can serve as evidence of work, otherwise an employer can freely deny the worker's account. Both employers and workers pay a fee to agencies, which then act as the go-between. The employer and the worker must first agree on conditions; then the employer should inform the prospective worker about who she will take care of, her workload, hours, and the size of the house to be cleaned. Wages are negotiated, including whether workers will receive what is an increasingly common day off per week, or instead earn overtime pay.⁸⁸ This is a great improvement since 2005-2007, when the workers I interviewed usually had one day off per month and sometimes none. Contracts differ however, both in what is covered and the specificity or vagueness of the terms. One Beijing agency contract states that during the probationary month both parties can break contract given due cause, or they must give 30 days' notice.⁸⁹ Other contracts may be biased towards the employer, and allow them to fire workers on shorter notice. These socio-structural vulnerabilities in the labor relationship mean that workers need to expend physical and emotional effort to please employers, in the interest of finishing their job with minimal criticism, getting paid, and maintaining a good relationship with the intermediary employment agency. Workers become more vulnerable to subordination, and given the lack of security and protection, it is often easier for them to cope by simply obeying their employers rather than mentioning the problematic issue. When work devolves into problems of minor or major abuses of power, their situations become more challenging.

Direct Subordination

Micro-managing and Dishonest Control

Power can be directly exerted within the workplace to define the scope of a domestic's work, to control the worker's body and movements by directing the manner in which she works, the intensity or length of time she works for, and her free time. Even hourly

⁸⁸ Hu, *China's New Underclass*: 91-92; Sun, *Maid in China*: Appendix 2.

⁸⁹ Beijingbaomu.com, "Beijing Fuwu Shiti yu Jiazheng Fuwuyuan Xieyishu (Nanny and Housekeeper Service Agreement)," Accessed on November 4, 2011, <http://www.beijingbaomu.com/xueyuan/info.asp?px=34>.

workers, who among all domestic workers have the least contact with clients, may feel they cannot take a break. As one said, “You can’t drink or rest; you can’t stop working (cleaning). And then the next day you can barely move.” Their work is often physically harder than live-in workers, and they pay a bodily toll for their freedom from employers’ everyday control. They are aware that many employers expect them to work hard and continuously for the entire time they are paid, and know that their work is under inspection. Monitoring is an effective mechanism to push the women to work faster and harder. Han said,

Some people are just mean, when you are working in their home they seem to feel that you should basically work yourself to death. It’s like they are using a prodger, they are behind you hurrying you up and tell you to work quickly and make things clean. You can’t even stop for one minute.

Some live-in workers complained that when they had finished their tasks, instead of allowing them to rest, their employers would find further work for them to do. By adding additional tasks during rest days, employers also limit workers’ free time. Other forms of micro-management and control include when employers hold workers to a very high standard or ask them to do more work than what would suffice. For example, they might be asked to clean the same area over again, or to handwash certain clothes, like baby clothes, even though the family has a washing machine. One woman complained that her employer told her she was holding the baby improperly, and made her change the position. The worker told me she had thought to herself that having successfully raised two children, she should know what she was doing as opposed to her employer who was a new mother. Controlling workers’ movements limits their autonomy, for in addition to following the tasks assigned to them, they must also change their own methods of cleaning, cooking and caretaking.

Some employers manipulate workers to make them stay or leave. Employers can delay monthly payments, forcing the women to continue working or risk losing a good portion of their salary. When clients refuse to pay workers their full wages, sometimes the workers hang around only to be told that the client will call the police on them if they do not leave. If an employer does not like her worker, but does not want to pay extra for breaking the provisional contract, she can make life difficult for the worker, to pressure her to break the contract instead. Employers use deceit as a tactic; it is not uncommon for employers to misrepresent to prospective workers their full workload and obligations. Many workers have mentioned arriving at a job only to find that the

house is much larger than the employer stated, or they have to care and cook for more people than they had understood to be the case. Their elderly clients might be more disabled or ill than was represented. Hourly workers may arrive at a house, and be told what they need to accomplish within a few hours. If they are not skilled enough to assess whether this is indeed possible, or that the employers have assigned an impossible workload, the employers might then use their failure to complete the work as an excuse to not pay or to underpay them. Zhao An has experienced this more than once,

She (employer) [previously] just said how much per hour, but then only after I arrived at her house does she tell me what I need to clean completely in two hours. After two hours I wasn't able to finish, so she had me work two and a half hours, but still only paid me two hours' worth. It's not fair. It's not a big deal to work an extra half hour, but if I don't get paid for it, then I worked in vain.

Deceit links back to the commodification of labor and the worker; for many employers seem to be concerned about obtaining as much labor as possible, rather than thinking about whether they could be exploiting people.

When the women realize their employers have concealed their true expectations, they must decide what to do. Moral judgment aside, the women must also think of the practicality of their response. If an hourly worker has already accepted the assignment and travelled to the client's house, she must then reassess the situation. If she is unlikely to be able to clean the house within the set amount of time, she could refuse to work, because she knows that having already been dishonest, the employer could refuse to pay her for the overtime that is needed. But the worker might have already spent money on transportation, and her employment agency is expecting a cut of the wages, so she might have to accept. If a live-in worker is expected to do much more than she was led to believe, she must take their relationship into account. If she protests, the employer will not be happy with her, and she may not get paid, so it may become a question of deciding how much to tolerate before she leaves. She may also acquiesce because she is loathe to create any conflict or unpleasantness, and feels that she has no other choice.

The Humiliations of Restrictions and Deprivation

Deprivations such as of food, time off, sleep, privacy, wages, and dignity reflect how subordinating employers view their workers. Deprivation also conveys a message to the women about their worth. It may be something that is occasional, or it could be a daily practice approaching what Sandra Bartky calls a “ritual of subjugation.” Although Bartky was describing sexual objectification, her term also serves to highlight domestic workers’ subordinate position and subjugation.⁹⁰ These “rituals of subjugation,” like being made to eat in the kitchen alone and only after the family eats, pointedly indicate what employers think of their workers.

In the following account, Tao Lin describes the spartan diet provided by her employers.

For breakfast we ate different things, they drank milk and ate eggs and bread. I had steamed buns, pickled vegetables and drank water. At noon I ate rice, in the afternoon I had plain steamed buns. I thought, my god, I’m over 40 and if I keep eating like this and my health breaks down, what do I do? If my health breaks down, I can’t even earn one penny. You have to spend all your money on seeing doctors. What type of person can take that? This family would buy fruit, and when the son, his wife and child were eating, they’d close the door. Sometimes the old lady’s son would buy watermelon, and sometime she’d give me a piece. Every day eating buns and salted vegetables for breakfast, and the money isn’t much either, I thought this life was too harsh (*keke*). I worked for them for two months then I stopped.

Tao Lin does not speak explicitly about the reasons why she is treated differently and deprived of nutritious food by her employers. But as the family deliberately shuts the door on her to exclude her from sharing fruit, they reinforce the message that she is an outsider who does not deserve the same degree of care and nutrition as they do. It is not uncommon for domestic workers to be denied foods like meat, eggs, fruit, seafood and dairy products. Daily food, rather than being life-sustaining, instead becomes a symbol of Tao Lin’s maltreatment and objectification.

Restrictions are common for domestic workers, and they appear to encounter them more frequently when working for the elderly, who likely have lived through periods of privation and scarcity. However despite this possible influence, it does not seem fair to place far greater restrictions on their workers than on themselves. Some employers have been known to limit the number of showers workers can take per week, to the point

⁹⁰ Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*: 26-27.

where they must go for days without a shower. Workers are sometimes told to handwash their own clothes instead of using the family's washing machine, or are forbidden to watch TV. Workers usually do not have their friends and family visit, since the home is still considered to be the employer's private space. Rang Hong describes common restrictions by employers in such a way as to suggest that the oppressive has become normalized, to the extent that normal courtesies become something for which the worker is grateful. Her account also evokes a sense of being micro-managed and having to cope with extra layers of control and expectation that are beyond what should be the norm:

With some clients, you can't make phone calls. Some people are really good and the family I'm with now lets me use the phone. For example, if I am going out today since it's my day off, I still have to cook breakfast for you in the morning, and in the evening I have to come back to cook. And this is rest? Some people say this isn't rest. That's just one meal at noon that I haven't had to cook. Some clients give you restrictions, some don't. Some restrict your use of water or electricity. The first time you use water you have to use the leftovers to rinse the toilet. The second time you have to use it to water the flowers, some people are like that.

Discriminatory and dehumanizing subordination, as exhibited through deprivation and restrictions, convey a message of low worth and outsider status. Whether intended or not, this subordination serves to humiliate and psychologically degrade workers. When an employer restricts, deprives and subordinates her worker, the rural person's relation to her urban household becomes like a microcosm of exploitative and inequitable urban-rural relations. The above-mentioned forms of direct subordination are closely linked with dominant understandings about workers. While women seek to find value, respectability and appreciation through their profession, many employers continue to delegitimize domestic work and control workers through routine bodily and psychological subordination. The question that arises is how this subordination works to elicit desired responses, and what is the nature of its effects.

Part III THE OPERATION OF SUBORDINATING POWER AND ITS EFFECTS

Subordinating power initiates a process whereby domestic workers become aware of their own actions as measured and judged by their employers. Ideological and

institutionalized power and acts directly subordinating domestic workers can work together to generate compliant attitudes, acts of compliance and self-discipline, and the perception that workers have little other choice. Domestic workers often proactively, although perhaps reluctantly, undertake to change their own actions and behavior to fall in line with what is expected.

Before exploring the specific effects and operations of power, I will introduce a few points about subordination as compared to power theorist Steven Lukes' work on three dimensions of power.⁹¹ Our points do not directly correspond, but broadly overlap in describing the various reasons why people will comply with power. The first of Lukes' points concerns the capacity to get someone to comply despite an observable conflict of interest, the second involves non-decisionmaking, whereby power works to prevent the dominated from making decisions on issues that are not in their interest, and the third dimension of power that Lukes highlights is: "to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things."⁹² Lukes' three dimensions range from direct action to removing issues from the proverbial table for discussion, to a form of normalization in which people not only accept their domination but may not realize that it works against their interests. His three dimensions could be seen as describing varying degrees of normalization of subordination, in which one's recognition of subordination becomes increasingly obscured, and one correspondingly becomes more powerless to transform one's situation.

My points describe different aspects of how subordination prevents workers from leaving, speaking out or resisting, and how it successfully elicits desired behavior. These points also address how subordination changes workers' perspectives not only about their situation, but also about themselves, both of which can lead to their compliance. First of all, as I have previously discussed, subordination is facilitated by certain socio-structural and ideological values, that is, the power institutionalized in worker-employer labor relations which is also linked to rural workers' low social status, and the ideological values related to historical gender inequality and female servitude. These values define domestic workers' lack of power within their labor relations, and expectations for silence and compliance. Secondly, subordination affects how the subordinated view their self-efficacy, or their ability to improve their situation. When

⁹¹ Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London, Great Britain: Macmillan Press, 1974); ———, *Power*.

⁹² ———, *Power*: 15, 24-25.

workers think that they have no choice but to tolerate subordination, or believe that their situation is not sufficiently severe to warrant resistance or exit, then they will not try to alter their situation.⁹³ Workers also fear what could happen if they resisted or caused trouble. They are further disempowered when subordination induces feelings of psychological oppression. Finally, subordination affects workers' perspectives about themselves, by facilitating a process whereby the subordinated come to see themselves and their behavior through the eyes of the dominant, and then alter their behavior.

Lukes principally focuses on his third dimension of power, where grievances never arise because people cannot imagine anything different, or because they see it as natural or positive.⁹⁴ He believes this to be the most important because it is the least visible to the dominated. I propose, however, that subordinating power is the most effective when it is congruent with dominant social norms, and when workers privilege employers' desires even at their own expense. Subordination is at best, only partially normalized. However, as long as workers do not see resistance or negotiation as a feasible option, subordination will remain effective.

ATTITUDES OF COMPLIANCE

Apology

Some workers become enmeshed in a discourse of apology and obligation. They can easily be made to feel apologetic or guilty about their work, although they are the ones performing the service. It may be that employers expect or at least hope for the performance of a model domestic worker, and employ pressure and sometimes guilt through complaints, to compel them to work industriously. A peculiar sense of obligation also emerges from workers' accounts when they mention getting paid. Some of them sound apologetic about "taking money from their employers' pockets." I venture to guess that this may be because domestic workers are paid directly by their employers or clients, so they view their wages as coming out of the family's salary or savings. This stands in contrast to waged work in factories, for example, where wages

⁹³ The point about remaining in a difficult situation because one believes it is not severe enough to leave is derived from Pangsapa's interpretation of Marilyn Frye's concept of efficient exploitation. Piya Pangsapa, *Textures of Struggle: The Emergence of Resistance Among Garment Workers in Thailand* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 16-18.

⁹⁴ Lukes, *Power*: 28.

come from a company. When employers complain about their high wages, workers are made to feel obligated to make their wages “worth it” for their employers.

When workers have worked very hard but are reprimanded for their poor work, some still engage in self-blame or apology. Tang had worked till exhaustion, and had cleaned the client’s dirty porcelain vases three times. The client’s husband came home and reprimanded her for not cleaning them enough. “I was so tired I went home. Although I was tired I would sometimes think about it while my tears fell—splash splash—how could we be as incompetent as what you (the husband) said. For one thing I blame myself; another thing is that I blame my fate.”

Mastery of the Smile

As low-class workers, the women are often expected to perform deference. One of the gestures that most powerfully symbolizes workers’ subordination is the smile. Smiles are an expected part of the service profession, but the practice is also gendered and often serves to mask genuine feeling. Bartky points out that in general, women are exploited even in the “economy of smiles,” and are trained to smile far more often than men.⁹⁵ When a few of my informants talked about smiling, it was usually in the context of using smiles as a way to cope with poor treatment. Tao Lin expands upon her need to smile and repress emotion in the workplace:

As Teacher (staff at employment agency) says, when someone criticizes you, you can’t respond to them with a look on your face, you can’t have that sort of facial expression. She (the employer) is an ill person, sometimes her husband says that she’s not normal and to disregard what she says. I don’t get angry because if I got angry I wouldn’t be able to show it. No matter what, I’m staying in their home and working for them, I can’t have an unpleasant look on my face. When I’m angry my face droops. So, whatever she says, I put a smile on my face. Once her husband criticized me then he said “how can you always be so cheerful?” I said “if I’m not happy about things, I can’t just cry.” He said “when I look at you, you look as though nothing had happened.” I thought, my god, if I got angry after you said two words to me, I would have no way of doing my work. It’s not possible in a household, that the client will never criticize you. You (the worker) are thinking “what I did was right.” The head of household is thinking “you haven’t done it based on my way of thinking, based on my wishes.” So they might reprimand you. Each household has its own lifestyle, so when you go a new household, it’s not possible that you do

⁹⁵ Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*: 68.

everything to the satisfaction of the clients, sometimes they won't be satisfied and they'll reprimand you.

Sometimes they'll point at you as they say things. I've thought about it, I'm going to your house to earn money, so if you say a few things, you say a few things. I do domestic work, and if I do something wrong, then you say that I did something wrong, and I'll change. It's like what that man said that time, "I criticize you, yet you respond smilingly, you aren't angry." He thought I should be angry, he probably thought "how can you be so thick-skinned." I felt uncomfortable, but I still had to have a smile on my face. No matter what, you are taking other people's money, they are employing you.

Workers have to look out for their employer's facial expression of displeasure, but they cannot wear one themselves. They are expected to discipline themselves to maintain a polite, smiling face, regardless of the circumstances. Tao feels obligated to control herself; her primary concern is satisfying her clients. Her smile is like a barrier which holds back her authentic voice and expressions in response to her lost dignity. Instead of acting upon her feelings, Tao regularly defers to the greater authority of the staff at her agency. It is striking that she has internalized or adopted the smile to such an extent that even her employer questions her lack of reaction to his criticism. Tao is conflicted by the feelings of her lived "double consciousness," which she cannot afford to show, and the mask of smiles she feels she must bear. She also rationalizes that because of different preferences, all employers will criticize you about something. She therefore shifts her focus to service and away from the implications of her employer's behavior. This is in part how subordinating power operates unseen, when employers' expectations come to shape how the workers judge themselves and their actions at work, sometimes becoming so ingrained or habitual that it is difficult to change.

Judith Rollins touches upon the phenomenon of deference, but claims that since deference is performed purposefully, being deferential does not actually change the domestic worker. She maintains that a worker can feel superior to her employer since she is fooling her with the performance.⁹⁶ Some may agree with Rollins, but I suggest that it may also become normalized, as when Tao Lin temporarily but regularly accepts the need to play the subservient part of a maid. This machination of power also causes workers to maintain rather than resolve their double consciousness and double identity, which is their own identity plus that which they are seen to possess. These workers are less likely to understand the harm of such a double existence, which is experienced in

⁹⁶ Rollins, *Between Women*: 163-69.

having to live both identities, and their right to be recognized for their authentic selves and hard work.

MOVING BEYOND COMPLIANCE

The most insidious response to subordination occurs when workers do not just comply, but are increasingly careful to watch themselves, and proactively mold themselves to the expectations of their employers.

Improving the Domestic Worker: The Extraction of Self-Discipline

Here, I introduce a passage that conveys the mundane details of a process that generates self-discipline. Details of the tedious minutiae of a domestic worker's life in a household illustrate how a worker can seldom feel completely at ease. Tao Lin has come to accept the need for responsiveness, and her consequent lack of control over her own actions within the house.

Sometimes elderly people, like the old lady, ask me to open the window. I haven't sat back down for five minutes when she tells me to close it. Sometimes while you are eating, she'll tell you to go close the window, sometimes she'll tell you to eat your fill. In the end, I'm working in their home. Whatever they want you to do, then that's what you do. You have to listen to the head of household. We can't follow our own wishes. Once in their home I said "at noon there is something on TV." The son was watching a cross-talk performance on TV. I said "let's watch TV," he said "don't watch TV during the daytime, you'll waste electricity, 1 RMB per kilowatt hour." Every day he watches from 7-9 pm then punctually turns it off. So I never got to watch their TV. Sometimes the elderly lady turns it on, and says that I can watch, but I don't watch. Sometimes I like to buy books or publications, so I'll read those instead of watching TV. I say that I can make a mistake once, but I won't make the same mistake twice. That's what I'm like; I will try to the best of my ability not to make that mistake again. If I did, the clients would certainly not be happy.

The ideal domestic worker, which Tao Lin appears to emulate, learns quickly and disciplines herself. She even tries to anticipate problems and adjusts herself accordingly. Her description calls to mind Iris Marion Young's appraisal of non-professional workers:

The powerless have little or no work autonomy, exercise little creativity or judgment in their work, have no technical expertise or authority, express

themselves awkwardly, especially in public or bureaucratic settings, and do not command respect.⁹⁷

Blatant or subtle, subordinating words, gestures, demands, and conditions collectively function as a sort of primer to inform workers who their employers think they should be and how they should act. This section will discuss how these influences, backed up by the hiring power of employers in the form of wages, work to extract self-discipline from workers. These influences often reshape workers' definitions of what is misconduct and what is not acceptable. Everyday situations become fraught with tension and underlying meanings, particularly for live-in workers who come to understand that employers can try to control every part of their lives as long as they live and work within those four walls. Conditions and treatment are not merely differential, but often highly unequal.

Although workers are aware of how employers see them and what they expect, they may also come to accept the high standards of an "ideal worker." This is not a black and white case of internalization versus objective awareness; their understandings and reactions fall somewhere in-between. For example, Bartky presents one interpretation of internalization not as necessarily believing something, but as:

the sense of oneself as a distinct and valuable individual is tied not only to the sense of how one is perceived, but also to what one knows, especially to what one knows how to do... Whatever its ultimate effect, discipline can provide the individual upon whom it is imposed with a sense of mastery as well as a secure sense of identity.⁹⁸

This means that when a worker does well in what she knows she is expected to do, she feels a "sense of mastery" and security that is directly linked to her fulfillment of the imposed identity. The domestic worker's consciousness shifts so that she comes to judge herself through the eyes of her employer. Many workers find satisfaction in being fast and efficient workers who make their employers happy and who do not cause any trouble within the household. Some try to leave a minimal footprint on the family's life and adapt to their ways and expectations.

⁹⁷ Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*: 56-57.

⁹⁸ Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*: 77.

The Effects of Monitoring and Observation

The following accounts illustrate how observation and control foster self-discipline, and explore the impact of the disciplinary process on workers.

Lin mentioned how one employer would feed her domestic worker one steamed bun at a time, assessing how much she ate. Another worker recounted, “There was an elderly lady in that family. When she had some steamed buns that she couldn’t finish eating, she’d leave them in the fridge until they were about to go bad. Then she would call you, the maid, to eat it.” In situations like this, workers know that they should not eat food or fruit until invited by the employer, even if it is about to go bad, because employers will notice. This worker also referred to the demeaning aspect of being offered unwanted leftover food, a complaint I heard from multiple workers. Tao Lin told me about how her employers, a married couple, bought two white cucumbers, and the three of them ate one. After some time, she noticed that the other one was going bad and brought it to the wife’s attention. The wife said to throw it away, but Tao thought it was a waste of money, and said that she would salvage and eat the parts that were still good. The husband came home later and noticed the peel in the garbage, which led him to comment, “I remember that we bought two white cucumbers, is that from the white cucumber? Bring it to us to eat.” I said “it was going bad, so I peeled it and ate it.” He said “oh, you ate it...Ok, you ate it.” She took his meaning to be “my god, you didn’t speak up about it. You just eat what you want; you act so freely in our home.” Tao then started questioning herself; she was unsure whether he assumed she ate it and asked her deliberately, intending to provoke guilt and better behavior.

Many of these forms of control are blatant and clearly discriminatory. Overall their effect can be oppressive and workers can come to believe that they are powerless to change their situation. The monitoring of workers like Tao brings to mind Foucault’s observations about buildings designed to surpass mere functionality and to make inhabitants obedient through their awareness of their visibility. An employing family’s apartment or house itself also becomes a “mechanism for training” and an “apparatus for observation.”⁹⁹ However, this is not because of its design, but rather the intent of the employer that transforms it into a space that encourages the worker to discipline herself. If the employer is not confident about a worker’s abilities, then she may watch, comment, and check on her work. Domestics become aware that they are being

⁹⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*: 172.

observed, so start to modify their actions accordingly. If a member of the family is actively supervising them, then they have little autonomy. Multiple workers have mentioned being watched as they eat, sometimes silently, sometimes accompanied by a comment on how much they eat, which is usually successful in compelling the worker to feel self-conscious and eat less. Even the trash bin becomes a point from which to observe the worker's actions. Tao's analysis of what happened after she ate the cucumber and what the employer was thinking, reflects the low social status of domestic workers and the suspicion with which many employers view them. As Wanning Sun points out, circulating narratives of risk that suggest that workers are untrustworthy and unreliable, provide a reason to monitor and control workers.¹⁰⁰ Workers are portrayed as untrustworthy either in the sense that they could steal, or that their skills and knowhow cannot be trusted. The apartment, particularly of the upwardly mobile and wealthier classes, is also a symbol of modernity which stands in stark contrast with the rurality of the workers who clean it. Employers may assume that workers are unfamiliar with all its trappings and lack the skills to clean it properly. And as Hairong Yan suggests, their ruralness has come to mean inferior knowledge and inferior abilities.¹⁰¹

It is likely that from now on, Tao Lin will be more careful as long as she continues to work for these employers. It does not require constant subordination to provoke such cautiousness. One experience of being reprimanded or put down can be sufficient for workers to change their behavior. Marilyn Frye notes that for coercion (or power) to work, the threat does not have to be substantiated. The victim only has to believe that it is real, and will choose an action intended by the coercer because it seems to be the best alternative available.¹⁰² I suggest that within an environment in which workers are viewed with suspicion, monitored and directed, they come to quickly recognize words, looks and actions that represent this "threat." Moving to another household, they can also quickly recognize similar employers and react quickly to their "threatening motions," regardless of how insubstantial they are. Tao Lin's example was a case in point; she was not sure whether or not the husband thought she ate the cucumber, but imagined that he was shaming her for taking the liberty of so doing.

¹⁰⁰ Sun, *Maid in China*: 144.

¹⁰¹ Lee, *Working in China*, 160-61.

¹⁰² Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trumansburg, New York: The Crossing Press, 1983), 56.

There are other similar methods of influence used by employers. I submit that it is the tone of their command and their penetrating look that often suffice to remind workers of the system of production and self-discipline. While Foucault talks about disciplining bodies through institutions like jails, schools, factories and the military, domestic work is different because discipline is exercised by each employer in his or her own household.¹⁰³ Unlike the systematized discipline followed in Foucault's panoptical institutions, employers have not been formally taught how to discipline their workers. Their disciplinary techniques arise through social ideas about how to treat domestic workers, stories of how other employers treat them, or methods that employers come up with on their own.

Workers themselves best describe Foucauldian tactics of monitoring and control. Those who have the type of employers depicted in the following account are ill at ease, aware that at any moment they may be watched:

They detect, inspect and control. Like with videotaping, they outfit their house with it, just not in the bathroom. They put them in all the corridors and rooms. So you are in their house, and they know everything that you do. And why don't other families use this [videotaping]? It's because when you are in the kitchen cooking, there's someone there watching you, staring at you. Some people like to do that, so they do it. They all have this video equipment, and they put it (the tape) on in the evening to watch what you did during the day. Some families have you caring for an elderly person, and their children aren't living there, it's just you and the elderly person, so they watch to see if you abuse the old lady... When you know that their family has this, then you get this oppressed feeling, it's like you can't relax. Whenever you leave the house, then you can be free, but if you don't have free time and you are in their home, aiya, you feel really uncomfortable caring for an elderly person or child that they are afraid you will abuse, or that you will steal food to eat. They don't tell you [about the taping], you become aware of it yourself.

Some people often use maids, and so they put it (camera) in an inconspicuous place so that you aren't aware of it.¹⁰⁴ So, you haven't taken any precautions, you are in their home working, doing whatever, pretty unrestrained, but if you knew, you'd be really careful, if you knew there were eyes looking at you. In their home, I feel psychologically oppressed, I'm afraid of doing something wrong. I don't eat their fruit.

¹⁰³ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

¹⁰⁴ I do not know how common this practice is, as I have only heard of one or two accounts of workers who realized they were being taped.

This is not just an impersonal instance of monitoring as in banks or supermarkets. Surveillance within the home occurs only because of employers' deep distrust of their workers. Yet the workers are still expected to engage in physical and emotional labor for the family. As Tao Lin assessed, this situation results in psychological oppression and self-discipline. I suggest that the psychological impact is worse because they are expected to care for the family and be nurturing towards the elderly and children who are their charges, while likely feeling resentful and angry. Such a situation necessitates performance, for they cannot reveal their true feelings. Tao Lin's observations are similar to those of Frye's threat and coercion and to that which the Panopticon is supposed to achieve, "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power...the perfection of power should tend to render its exercise unnecessary."¹⁰⁵ In the late 1700s, Jeremy Bentham discussed the desired effects of constructing a Panopticon:

It is obvious...that the more constantly the persons to be inspected are under the eyes of the persons who should inspect them, the more perfectly will the purpose of the establishment have been attained. Ideal perfection...being impossible, the next thing to be wished for is, that, at every instant, feeling reason to believe as much, and not being able to satisfy himself to the contrary, he should conceive of himself to be so.¹⁰⁶

Employers implicitly buy the right to control and scrutinize their work and how it is done, and although workers express annoyance, this surveillance is at least effective for as long as workers are monitored.

In this section I have constructed a picture of the process and effects of subordinating power. The effects are sustained by practices of many people wielding power in similar environments and similar labor relations. The commonness of this practice means that it is more readily accepted by those who enter into these relations, particularly by those who view these situations as unchanging reality rather than as variable social constructions. Although situations and relations vary, workers' subordinate position rarely does, so it is natural for workers to see their role as one of conforming to or accommodating the "system." Workers tend to not remain in one position for years, but cycle through a number of similar jobs, refining their methods of finding jobs but especially of selling themselves, learning how to perform their work better, and perhaps improving their social skills to interact harmoniously with employers. Part of selling or

¹⁰⁵ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*: 201.

¹⁰⁶ Jeremy Bentham, *Panopticon; or, The Inspection-House* (Dublin: T. Payne, 1791), 3.

advertising themselves is adapting to what employers want. In doing so, they can come to assess themselves not only based on their performance but also on keeping a harmonious work relationship, which may involve self-silencing and self-discipline. However, because their behavior must sometimes be artificial and contrived, workers are then aware of their decisions to accommodate and act deferential towards employers.

SUBORDINATION'S IMPACT ON COGNITIVE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Subordinating power can generate feelings of powerlessness or inertia as well as initiate psychological oppression, altering how workers come to see themselves and their space for action.

Choiceless Choice

Choiceless choice occurs when workers feel that they have no choice but to please their employers by being good workers, and remaining silent in the face of subordination. It involves a shift in perceptions and sometimes a sense of debility and helplessness that results from the exercise of power. Workers are at constant risk of being fired, so must pay attention to employers' comments and reactions that communicate their satisfaction or displeasure. Employers and workers both know that employers have the power to withhold or dock wages, or to report the worker to the agency. This may remain an unspoken threat; employers can cause inconvenience and trouble if workers do not try to please them. There is often an underlying anxiety in domestic work, because workers are afraid of being reprimanded or worse. Luo spoke of the inherent anxiety and pressure to perform for domestic workers, which is exacerbated by the insecure nature of their occupation.

Now they've fired me, and it seems to have dispelled the enthusiasm that I've had towards domestic work. There was some sentiment between us (with the employer's family), and I always thought about their child. Then they fired me, and I have no idea why, because I worked really hard for them. Anyhow, in the domestic work profession, if people don't employ you then they don't employ you. Anyways, there are many, many people who try you out for a few days and if they don't think it will work, they have you leave. When I was told to leave, I felt really uncomfortable, maybe because there had been a lot of pressure.

Stories about other workers' experiences circulate and function as cautionary tales about domestics' vulnerability, such as ones concerning workers who had their wages docked or who were accused of stealing. Such an environment is conducive to careful conduct.

What are other similar ways in which subordinating or oppressive power functions without inciting resistance or exit? I contend that the most significant influence of subordinating power, at least from a rights and well-being perspective, is its psychological impact. When workers believe that they cannot change a situation, they unwillingly comply; hence the exerted power continues to have its desired effect. In Eric Wolf's discussion on power, he cites Lamont Lindstrom who indicates that what is open for discussion is key:

Control of the questions—even more than control of the answers—maintains social inequalities in that such control helps frame and make sense of felt desire...[In this way,]...the powerful set the conversational agenda and, by this means, establish inequalities more difficult to perceive or challenge.¹⁰⁷

In the case of domestic workers, employers have control of the “questions” and the conversational agenda. Employers focus on the cost, quality and quantity of labor that they can purchase from a worker with minimal impact on their home life. These concerns become the legitimized focus in worker-employer relations, which means that workers' questions and concerns are consequently less important, delegitimized and hidden. Workers must respond to their employers' “questions,” even though they themselves are more concerned about pay, conditions and fair treatment. Although the workers' “questions” may be occasionally discussed, the conversational agenda and day-to-day concerns are likely to focus on how well a worker performs. Workers consequently often come to assess themselves based on the excellence of their work and their ability to satisfy their employers.

Domestic workers can quit their jobs. However, if they feel they are unable to contest difficult work situations or poor treatment, and they know that their next job could be as bad as their current one, they may feel resigned to enduring their current situation. Many workers therefore adopt a pragmatic approach and choose to gain what benefits they can, without attempting to challenge the system. It is useful to explore how workers see their latitude for action within the labor relationship or the “system.” In her study of Thai factory workers, Piya Pangsapa refers to Marilyn Frye's use of the

¹⁰⁷ Lamont Lindstrom, *Knowledge and Power in a South Pacific Society* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 13, cited in Wolf, *Envisioning Power*: 55.

term “coercion” and Susan Tiano’s use of “acquiescence, accommodation and alienation” to describe some ways that women experience the system of productive relations. Pangsapa found that the owner of the factory manipulated workers into deciding to continuously work over 90 hours a week. Adapting Tiano’s concepts to domestic workers, those who are “accommodating,” adapt to the system without resisting or attempting to change it, because they can improve their lives with their wages. They feel empowered to act within the parameters of the system. However, “alienated” women feel powerless to change the system.¹⁰⁸ Both of these characteristics are present in domestic workers’ actions. Within domestic worker-employer relationships, many workers similarly decide to work the way they are expected to, even if there are aspects of their situation that are demeaning or exploitative. The difference between adaptation and alienation lies in their attitude towards and perceptions about domestic work labor relations. Some will willingly work in challenging circumstances because they can still raise their families’ standard of living, and others grudgingly work, knowing that they are paid and treated poorly, but have no other options to earn sufficient money.

Pangsapa suggests that attitudes that accommodate and do not critique the difficult jobs that dominate their lives may result from “efficient exploitation.” Pangsapa’s interpretation of “efficient exploitation,” a term from Frye’s work, describes a situation that exploits workers yet allows them a degree of autonomy and mobility, the end result being that workers do not resist because their situation is not sufficiently extreme or intolerable.¹⁰⁹ Many domestic workers find themselves being “efficiently exploited” when employers use tactics to elicit more physical and emotional labor for less pay, but for various reasons they go along with their employers’ desires. “Efficient exploitation” is not a sufficient explanation for accommodation, since culturally relevant understandings also play a role, such as the understanding that migrant work often entails bitterness and hardship. Ethical considerations will be considered in the following chapter. Even if domestic workers believe that their employers’ behavior is wrong, they may still see it as legitimate, insofar as that those who hire laborers may often treat workers in these ways. And even if the behavior is seen as illegitimate, workers may still think that they are powerless to change how their employers act.

¹⁰⁸ Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1983) and Susan Tiano, *Patriarchy on the Line: Labor, Gender and Ideology in the Mexican Maquila Industry* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), cited in Pangsapa, *Textures of Struggle*: 16-18.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

When workers think that they can neither change their work environment nor treatment, conformity and acquiescence appear to be the pragmatic choice.

Under the Weight of Psychological Oppression

Subordination has a weighty psychological impact on workers, as the content of employers' commands and disciplinary attempts affects workers' perceived space for (re)action. Rang Hong eloquently illustrates the harm that workers do to themselves in submitting to subordination. She shows that a purely pragmatic approach to tolerating mistreatment for money comes at too high a cost. Women must be allowed to work with dignity. This account follows a description of one of her domestic worker "sisters" who was bullied and forced to work nonstop all day:

I think that some people would put up with it; it's ok as long as they are able to earn money. Some people would mull this over, and say [to themselves] "you are always just enduring it, will the day come when it's enough?" Some people won't tolerate it. Others would say, "just tolerate it, as long as you have money in hand, it's alright."

When I asked whether enduring such treatment would influence one, Rang replied,

It would certainly influence one. You feel stifled. If you go work every day for someone who is not a good person, then your heart would feel more oppressed day by day. *You can oppress yourself* (added italics). You endure it to earn this money, then there will come a time when you will just erupt, you won't [tell yourself] "endure it." It's like when boiling water reaches a boil there's a sort of feeling that it turns and swells upwards. Then maybe I'll fight or argue with you. It's that type of consequence.

Importantly, Rang realizes one's role in one's own oppression; the continual act of submission is a sort of consent to mistreatment, and a type of self-harm. Rang then turns to recount her negative experience as she first commenced domestic work. She recalled how her first employer bullied her because she could not speak Mandarin properly. She reasoned that since people learn Beijing dialect after spending a while in Beijing, the old lady would not treat her the same way now. Rang recognized that the elderly employer engaged in differential treatment, and hinted that employers who act like this treat workers, as a group, differently. However, instead of attributing this to unequal social relations, she located the cause for the lady's inappropriate behavior within herself. Rang's two accounts analyzing the dynamics of subordination are valuable for

showing the progressive yet uneven development of socio-political consciousness. Struggle is required to unearth the reasons why one is oppressed.

I asked what Rang would recommend to friends who were in this type of situation, and she said:

I think that if I had friends in this situation, I would tell them to stop working. It can psychologically harm one. If you are psychologically hurt, then you are always oppressed. It's a mental reaction, you think about it every day. It constrains you. It's like gasping for air when there isn't any. It's like you always feel that there is a stone pressing down on you. When you are pressed upon, mightn't there be an accident? When you keep constraining yourself you can make yourself sick. That little bit of money you earn isn't even enough to see a doctor. I would urge her [to quit].

Rang Hong's voice provides compelling food for thought for those who practice the "smile" and who regularly feel the impact of double consciousness.

Living a Double Identity

Lin is one of the many workers who has had some experience of what W.E.B. Du Bois terms "double consciousness." Du Bois used this term to describe the experience of black Americans living in the early 1900s in the US, who assumed the double identity of being both black and American. Black people living in a society of white power were not given the space to act freely or to claim their own identities; they had to respond to the imposed black identity. In describing this situation, Du Bois wrote:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.¹¹⁰

Although Chinese domestic workers are not differentiated by race, they are set apart by their rurality, class, lack of consumption power, and work. Their low status corresponds with their lack of social power to define themselves in the city. Often compelled to assume this lower-class work identity in public, they cannot remain oblivious to it as long as they remain in the city working among urban citizens. When domestic workers speak of "putting on a smiling face," responding with deference, and avoiding direct confrontation with employers, these actions all signify the imposed rural

¹¹⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Soul of Black Folk* (Boston, MA: Bedford Books, 1903/1997), 38.

female domestic worker identity. Tao and others' smiling face and suppressed anger are symptomatic of their double consciousness. "Consciousness" is an important part of the double consciousness concept, because the women are quite aware that they are seen as low-status rural maids and are expected to perform accordingly. Consequently, they suffer even more, because they are still forced to learn how to see themselves as higher-status others see them, and to simulate an identity that they do not want.

Living with their double identity often means working to reproduce the stereotype of the model domestic worker. Bartky presents stereotyping as an obstacle to being able to realize one's "authentic self." One is instead hampered by other imposed negative images of oneself.¹¹¹ At work, domestic workers are subjected to stereotypes about rural maids, so are effectively pushed to "internalize" them. These stereotypes reflect some inferior traits like low social status and intellect and "superior" traits such as cleaning efficiency. They often include expectations for silence which mute the voice of workers.

Another way to describe the process and harm of stereotyping is through Rollins' reference to James Baldwin's term "inner eye," which describes how the "inner eye" can cause a distortion of what dominant people actually see. In his case, it caused a type of "blindness" which renders black people invisible.¹¹² This is an apt metaphor for internal constructs and biases that not only shape how one views others, but which dehumanize them. Workers can become invisible as people, and more easily distinguished as labor. The inner eye is a socio-cultural lens adopted, often without questioning, by those with a comparatively elevated social or economic status. When employers interact with workers via their "inner eye," workers also see the ugliness of their own image and can even come to accept some understandings about their own shortcomings. This jarring image, however, can cause them to question the validity of their employers' position.

The contemporary situation of many black people in the US can be compared to that of the marginalized domestic workers. After the outcome of the Trayvon Martin case, in which an unarmed black teenager was shot and killed by an armed neighborhood watch volunteer who followed him and who was consequently acquitted, there has been increasing discussion about racial discrimination that permeates every aspect of black people's lives, men in particular. Multiple black men have written and spoken about

¹¹¹ Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*: 24-25.

¹¹² Rollins, *Between Women*: 211.

how they not only feel they need to be careful to avoid being targeted, but they are acutely aware of how uncomfortable they make others. They are always made aware of how they make others feel, such as when they see the apprehension in people's eyes, and how women clutch their bags and grab their children's hands. Because of the constant reinforcement of their social stigma, both rural domestic workers and many minority people today are caught in a situation in which simply being themselves is psychologically painful, and in which they have to constantly fight the messages of low self-worth (or accept them).

Bartky discusses a state similar to double consciousness which constitutes oppression: "it is in itself psychologically oppressive both to believe and at the same time not to believe that one is inferior."¹¹³ She suggests that coupled with a lack of socio-political awareness about the social relations producing oppression, people can either choose to believe that their group is inferior or rejecting this explanation for their treatment, fault themselves. Oppressed people struggle with a fragmentation of how they see themselves, and alienation. If Bartky's feminist Marxian interpretation were applied to domestic workers whose work and movements are excessively controlled, they would be seen as both alienated from their productive activity and from their own bodies.¹¹⁴ Socio-political consciousness is born through the process of unraveling this psychological paradox of one's supposed inferiority.

Multiple authors have suggested that alienation resulting from oppression, colonialism, or racism is quite particular.¹¹⁵ The crux of double consciousness or this type of alienation, is that it is imposed upon workers against their will, and it is not of their own making. Workers usually feel powerless to change the demeaning and inferior image which is tied to them. Workers' images of themselves do not matter to the employers who subordinate them. As nearly invisible people, they do not have the social power to create their own images. As Kelly Oliver says, "it is precisely the sense of arriving too late to create one's own meaning that can make the colonization of psychic space so effective."¹¹⁶ Oliver draws heavily upon Frantz Fanon's work, which describes the social and psychological aspects of alienation and of the relations between the colonizers and colonized. Fanon refers to this lack of ability for the colonized to

¹¹³ Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*: 30.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30-35.

¹¹⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*; Kelly Oliver, "Alienation as Perverse Privilege," in *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

¹¹⁶ ———, "Alienation as Perverse Privilege," 15.

promote his own meaning and to choose his identity, “for not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has to place himself.”¹¹⁷

Even the history, memories and institutions from which rural people can derive their identity and values are distorted by urbanites’ perceptions of the rural. Albert Memmi refers to the loss or “petrification” of the colonized’s memory and institutions where he loses respect for them and they fall into disregard.¹¹⁸ When some workers critique the backwardness of rural people, such as involving rural people’s low *suzhi* and their lack of thoughtfulness or cleanliness, and view their upbringing and environment with disdain rather than respect, they have likely at least partially adopted the inner eye of those they serve. Not only are workers muted within their double identity, but they cannot even talk and operate in their mother dialect when in the workplace, “in the linguistic conflict within the colonized, his mother tongue is that which is crushed. He himself sets about discarding this infirm language, hiding it from the sight of strangers.”¹¹⁹ Ultimately double consciousness creates a tension which must either remain as psychological oppression or which can be dissipated through rejection of their imposed identity or by acting upon their socio-political consciousness.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF SOCIO-POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Subordination is the primary source of socio-political consciousness, but for various reasons, it can become increasingly normalized and accepted at the same time. Freire has observed how an oppressed person may be resigned to his or her situation, and prefer security rather than taking the risk of gaining his or her “freedom.”¹²⁰ I suggest that most people have some experience of being “oppressed,” but as it is painful to acknowledge and address this reality, it is often easier to continue to conform to socially or politically prescribed roles rather than to challenge them. And when those surrounding one continue to accept some degree of subordinating, disempowering and sexist norms of behavior, these “roles” maintain a persuasive degree of legitimacy. Subordination tends to occur within certain relations in which, as with Farmer’s

¹¹⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*: 77-78.

¹¹⁸ Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1965/1991), 102-03.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹²⁰ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: 36.

structural violence, certain individuals have a vulnerability to suffering and being subordinated. If subordination is common, and particularly if it takes a subtle form, it is less likely to trigger increased awareness about inequities. I have just discussed how this subtle or pervasive subordination can come to be accepted. If it is partially normalized, it can inhibit socio-political consciousness.

However, it is important to recognize socio-political consciousness as one of the most potentially positive and liberatory effects of subordination. Upon first obtaining urban jobs, migrants soon experience their lower status as rural migrant workers, as reflected through the attitudes and actions of urban citizens. Hence, workers gain at least a minimal degree of socio-political awareness. In this way, being subordinated does not necessarily hinder development of socio-political consciousness, and in fact can raise key questions about legitimacy, equality and entitlement. Socio-political consciousness for migrant workers, which exists to varying degrees, is the recognition of their differential treatment and oppression, of how their unequal power relations are structured and mirrored throughout society, and the understanding that their oppression is unjust or illegitimate. In this section, I highlight how consciousness is generated from their experiences of discrimination and mistreatment, which have been prompted by markers of difference such as rural and class identity.

Domestic workers may come to recognize the reasons why they are treated in such a way as to leave them feeling dehumanized, objectified and demeaned. One example reflects a stereotype about untrustworthy rural domestics who steal from their employers. After a couple tested a worker's honesty by leaving a safe open and then commending her for not having touched it, the worker said, "When Auntie said this to me, it was really hard for me to take. I feel that that is how employers look down on hourly workers." She added, "for those of us who do this work, it is inherently work that others look down on." Other workers are treated as though they were only bodies capable of strenuous and dexterous physical work. The same worker was asked by an elderly woman to clean off the top of her kitchen range, although she did not have anything for the worker to stand on. During a focus group this worker told us, "think of how oily the top of the kitchen range is; it's so slippery. But you have to go up there, or else she won't pay you." The elderly husband saved her since he agreed it was risky, but the other workers commented that if he had not been there, the worker would have climbed up to clean it. Despite her fears of seriously hurting herself, the worker could not think of a way to refuse the employer's request. The elderly woman regarded the

domestic worker as labor hired to do what is dirty and dangerous, rather than a person whom she was placing in danger.

Workers' accounts also reflect their awareness about the rigidity of social boundaries, and their low social status. Part-time worker Lin touched upon the intersection of gender, class and subordination when she classified people by their social and marital aspirations. Although married, she said that hypothetically if she had to look for a mate, she would look for someone from the same ordinary background. She reasoned that if you have ambition and find someone who comes from a more privileged background, he will have been pampered since childhood and will try to control or put his wife down. Lin states that she is not a social climber and does not compare herself to others. This example shows how she is aware of power issues that can arise from a poor working class (female) person marrying someone wealthier, but also how easily she relinquishes possible social advancement. Lin appears to rationalize that ambition causes social conflict and further hardship, so she seeks a social position among the working class that is so ordinary as to be invisible.

Socio-Political Consciousness and a Smiling Face

Lin's account below represents an interesting example of the nuanced and varying attitudes and responses of workers who have been treated poorly, but who have not experienced any acute workplace issues. After spending over a decade in Beijing, Lin is keenly aware of continued discrimination and poor treatment based on wealth and entitlement, but this knowledge does not empower her to transform situations with her clients. Over her year or more of hourly domestic work, she has not only changed her strategy for dealing with clients who make her angry, but her character. Lin states that work has changed her character; now she is cooler-headed and puts up with more, with a smile on her face. She recounts how she dealt with one situation,

I'm shining shoes for her, I reckon I did it for an hour, that's sufficient, and why don't I leave it till next time and then I'll polish more. But [in reality] I won't return. Right? I'm like that, I won't offend you. I also won't argue with you, I'll just leave. When it's hard to take, that's discrimination. When I was there, I was polishing shoes, but at the same time I was also pretty upset. I felt really really angry... You're not happy, but can you go around pulling a long face? In this way, I don't say I don't want to shine your shoes. I don't say anything like that, I say that I have something to do, that I've an appointment. Right? Then the next time

we meet, everything will be fine. The other way isn't good, it's really awkward [when you meet].

Then Lin returns to the topic of discrimination and coping. "They have money and hire you, but one can generally say that there's still discrimination against those of us in this profession, right?" She lapses into silence, then continues,

I have that money, I've worked for that money, but still, in my mind there isn't equality. For them there's no equality. But there's no other way, you just endure it. If you think [the job] is appropriate then next time say you are coming, if you don't think it's suitable, then say you aren't coming. Right? If it's really awkward, then I just won't go. But if I can pretty much put up with it, then I'll go through with it, if you can put up with it then go work, if you can't tolerate it then just don't go.

Lin's approach towards life, which is pragmatic, low-risk and unambitious, strongly influences how she views the possibility of challenging power and her own low-status position. She accommodates rather than challenges. Her mindset is not of a person who thinks in terms of entitlement and rights or who has hopes for change, but who makes decisions within the limits of her circumstances. She does not believe one should aim high lest one fall hard. She prioritizes earning a living by causing the minimal fuss; she quotes the saying "*heqi shengcai*," amiability begets riches. Her approach means that she is not only unlikely to take risks, but would rather endure some form of subordination than "rock the boat" or broach issues with her clients. However, a rift between her professed contentment and lived inequalities still exists. She speaks frequently of her repressed anger, and the fact that you have no choice, you can only put up with these situations. Her work experiences have caused her to develop what might be considered passive coping mechanisms, where she either puts up with poor treatment, or finishes the job and never returns.

Coping mechanisms that maintain the status quo and perpetuate inequality ultimately cause the person who copes, to suffer the most. When a worker quits a job, she effectively ends the suffering in one situation, but opens the door to potentially experiencing problems with future employers. A worker can spend her life hopping from job to job, as many migrants do, but this strategy never fundamentally challenges abuses within the hierarchy of power, and leaves workers feeling disempowered and oppressed. Lin's anger and silence result in a stasis, an absence of change where the only path to change is to either adapt herself to what the employer wants or to change employers. I suggest that this would make it even more difficult for such a worker to

conceive of herself as an “agent of change.” In Lin’s case, a socio-political consciousness of how urban citizens use their wealth to excuse and facilitate mistreatment of workers has not yet sparked a decision to resist. Her anger wells up within her, but she sees the social divide as unnegotiable, and confrontation as unseemly.

Class Consciousness

I use the concept of class because it best represents workers’ emerging understanding of difference and exploitation that is developed through their urban labor experiences. An absence of an accessible class discourse may be the reason why many workers find it difficult to articulate class difference as a basis for their subordination, although the contours of class lurk in their narratives. Not all migrant domestic workers have a distinct class consciousness and understand power relations, but many workers understand themselves to be of lower class, an underclass in urban society. They are aware that their status and opportunities have been shaped by their poor rural origins, but also associate their feelings with professional domestic work which is sometimes still scarred by suggestions of illegitimacy and impropriety. Workers are compelled to perform others’ unwanted and often dirty labor, due to abject poverty and lack of opportunity. Consciousness about class includes the understanding that domestic workers are commodified as labor, and are sometimes treated as non-persons because of their social and economic location in relation to others. As Sally Sargeson notes, “conflicts in the work place indicate the development of workers’ consciousnesses of a specific type of social interaction which underpin a general condition which constitutes a class relationship.”¹²¹

Some workers think that employers are motivated as individuals and act immorally in order to satisfy their own wishes. Others believe that workers are mistreated by the wealthy. These workers refer to the division between social groups as based upon higher-level groups possessing wealth, social status and power over others like them, including the power to exploit people without being held accountable. One worker said that wealthy people can literally get away with murder, because money can buy anything, including silence. Lin explicitly linked clients’ superior wealth, social power and status with their treatment of domestic workers, “they (clients) say ‘this is no good, that isn’t good.’ Isn’t this a way of discriminating against you? [They think], I have

¹²¹ Sally Sargeson, *Reworking China's Proletariat* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1999), 223.

money, I'm elite. You don't have any money, you are lowly. They really discriminate against you." Her statement suggests that wealth not only determines unequal labor relations, but promotes a form of psychological oppression. Qiu, a 44-year-old hourly worker who experiences little of the pleasures of life, also keenly feels the impact of discrimination. Her self-identity is affected by her experience of being "low class:"

[I don't see myself] as the same as other people, every day I just feel low-status. Especially we who are migrant workers feel inferior to others, this work is lower-status than everyone else's, and especially we who do hourly work, the work that no one else does, scrubbing other people's toilets every day.

I asked a worker named Yan how high-level people and service personnel treat each other. She replied,

How high-level people treat low-level people, they think you are lowly and that they should trample on you, that sort of feeling. This is my way of looking at things. This group thinks about how much you earn.

Wages are not only related to status, but to choice and ultimately power. With wealth, one can direct one's life better, focus more on self-development, and can protect oneself against discrimination. Significant wealth is accompanied by expectations of deference and feelings of entitlement to enact class difference by "trampling" on others. This social emphasis on wealth and consumption only serves to further devalue the have-nots. bell hooks suggests that class in the US is a significant factor in the oppression of the poor. She sees class as shaped by consumerism, by people working to accumulate the symbols and objects that denote their privileged status. hooks suggests that obtaining wealth is a primary goal, since money is seen as the universal currency for purchasing things, power or people.¹²² In this context, poor people are seen as without value. Rural Chinese poor are not only marked by their economic poverty, but are recast as members of an anonymous, faceless mass wanting in culture and intellect, who are not expected to attempt to rise above their socio-economic class. The consumption practices of the middle and upper classes are not seen as direct violence against workers, however they serve to highlight the inferior identity of workers, as does subordination.

Freire also comments on the relationship between oppression, consumption and class:

Apart from direct, concrete, material possession of the world and of its people, the oppressor consciousness could not understand itself – could not even exist...In their unrestrained eagerness to possess, the oppressors develop the

¹²² bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 44-47.

conviction that it is possible for them to transform everything into objects of their purchasing power; hence their strictly materialistic concept of existence...For them, *to be is to have* and to be the class of the “haves.”¹²³

People who consider themselves to belong to the middle or upper classes, therefore have a vested interest in maintaining their economic and social privilege, which sets them apart and defines them. Yan captured the relevance of consumption and power to the behavior of those in different classes. When I asked her about what different groups she thinks there are in society, she responded:

There are people in this society who do all sorts of things. Like us in the domestic work profession, work is really tough. But people my age don't really have a choice, we can't find good jobs, we just have to put up with it (domestic work). Clients' families have education and a bit higher *suzhi* (quality), their lives are a bit better. For those of us who are service workers, life isn't so good. But we all have to find our own happiness. There is a group of people who do business, then us, we are the low-level group. Clients are a high-level group.¹²⁴ High-level people live in apartments, drive cars, eat well. We don't. You can see it, the difference is really clear. (I asked how people in these groups treat each other). We, the low-level group have to endure life, if we don't put up with things, then we'll have a lot of trouble. The upper class also has *suzhi*, they won't randomly bully you. But they have power, a high degree of influence. I think that we low-level people do things cautiously, discreetly. We can't provoke other people to be unhappy.

These accounts show that concepts of class play a significant role in workers' socio-political consciousness, and that the workers possess a class identity that is reproduced and highlighted by their experiences in the migrant working class, and by their marginalization and lack of citizenship within the city. Workers' socio-political consciousness which arises from their experiences and knowledge of oppression, can either serve to highlight their lack of power, or could potentially act as a catalyst for action.

Freire writes about how in the initial stage of the struggle to be liberated, men instead strive to be like their oppressors, who seem to be the epitome of “men.”¹²⁵ Socio-political consciousness is at the root of workers being able to escape their oppression, rather than trying to be like their oppressors. They must first recognize that they are subordinated, then distinguish the difference between their oppressors as a

¹²³ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: 58.

¹²⁴ Hourly workers may refer to people who hire them as clients rather than employers, since the work may be one time only.

¹²⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: 45.

group and people like themselves. This identification of class difference is key, because they may not just recognize class-based differential access to wealth, but also access to power and social status. This is a step away from realizing that this oppression born from difference is unjust. Once injustice is recognized, it is possible to apply oneself to pursuing justice.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have examined the accounts of domestic workers against the backdrop of societal power and workplace subordination, to unpack the complicated nature of socio-political consciousness as workers struggle to recognize and reconcile power. I have detailed the various ways in which workers are pressed to conform and submit to their employers' expectations, and how they are affected by and perceive subordinating power. When this power operates effectively or remains obscured, it often does not provoke resistance, as is the case with many workers who do not negotiate better work, conditions and treatment. Socio-political awareness is not synonymous with empowerment, it can fluctuate from topic to topic, and an individual may still justify actions that contradict her awareness. Even with socio-political awareness about how and why some employers view workers as commodified labor and act in ways that dehumanize them, workers may still hesitate to risk their jobs. Asserting themselves would implicitly suggest that their employers are in the wrong and that the workers do not see themselves through their employers' eyes. Although workers may remain silent in the face of subordination, and instead "wear a smile," they come to learn who their employers expect them to be, as defined by their class location and stereotyped norms about maids, and feel psychological hurt and anger.

As I have argued, analyses of oppression, power and subordination should highlight the effects on the psyche and consciousness. One can view their effects as a literal internalization, for what is imposed on the subordinated, generates change within. Oppression can generate self-oppression; external control and monitoring can extract self-control and discipline. Imposition of stereotypes and creation of double consciousness can cause internal conflict and some adoption of these norms and understandings. Power that oppresses creates inward-looking behavior rather than expansive growth. It both stultifies and effects internal change, including feelings of humiliation, inadequacy, resentment and anger.

I add to the literature on subordination and oppression by joining the process of subordination with the counter-process of developing socio-political consciousness. I do not explore subordination and “power over” workers as a hegemonic, uni-directional process. Although subordination does often result in self-discipline and self-silencing, I also explore its unintentional effects whereby the seed of consciousness is created that could then potentially act as a foundation for individual and group advocacy. I caution, however, that a critical understanding of one’s socio-political reality and the causes for subordination, does not inevitably lead to resistance and empowerment. There are ill effects of subordination, such as lowered self-confidence and esteem and feelings of being oppressed and powerless, but an individual does not suffer alone as long as she knows there are others who suffer similarly. Even isolated domestic workers tend to be able to snatch conversations here and there with their colleagues. Socializing and exchange of information is therefore also an integral part of socio-political consciousness. With observation and experience, a worker has sufficient information with which she can embark upon basic social and power analysis.

Building upon hooks’ observations about poor people being unable to attain respect when status is so strongly linked to consumption and wealth, I suggest that rural workers are also hard pressed to acquire greater status and value within the current system, in which they are firmly relegated to the lower echelons of the working class. Those with power in society recognize wealth, education and valued skills and resources, of which the working poor have little. Domestic workers become skilled at their work, but their work is not recognized as skilled. They are unable to become wealthy through work or acquire more formal education. With a critical lack of social mobility, rural domestic workers can generally only move horizontally throughout their lives, and take on jobs and positions of similarly low status. Within this context, the most straightforward way for domestic workers to be recognized is through good work and performance of their subordinated role. Their socio-political consciousness will only shift to critical consciousness when they come to believe that they can change the situations and relations that demean and exploit them.

CHAPTER 4

SHAPING ONESELF ETHICALLY IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

The last two chapters examined the significance of my informants' subordination and their responses within shared socio-cultural and socio-political contexts. The next two will also focus on socio-cultural and socio-political aspects of subordination, but within the confines of ethics and morality. While the previous chapter examined the effects of subordinating power and how it elicits compliance, this chapter investigates how an under-researched aspect of workers' identities—their ethical identity—can ultimately promote conformity to dominant discourses and discourage resistance. I explore the importance of discourses that motivate these workers not only as domestics and rural migrants, but as ethical individuals. This chapter seeks to explain how particular Chinese ethical, philosophical and urban discourses and norms shape domestic workers' responses to subordination and how they act towards others. Concepts of family obligation, *zuoren* (how to conduct oneself), and *suzhi* (quality) function as an informal ethical code of conduct for female migrant domestic workers. *Chi ku* (bearing hardships) and *chi kui* (suffering losses) are Chinese concepts that reflect a particular perspective that endows the women's negative experiences with meaning. Together, these concepts teach one how to be an ethical individual and maintain good relations with others, rather than how to morally appraise others' actions and to advocate for oneself. This chapter and the next one, in turn address ethics and morality. This chapter deals with inward-focused ethics, or ethically imbued concepts that domestic workers accept, strive to attain, or use to explain their actions through an ethical lens. They are concerned with how they themselves act, both in relation to others and for others. These ethical concepts are integral to their migrant worker identity, and are frequently framed and defined by their low rural status and lack of power. For the most part, they help workers integrate harmoniously into society. On the other hand, the chapter on morality involves an outward-focused morality, or workers' moral critiques of how others treat them. It focuses on the process through which workers react to immorality, their changing moral perspectives, and the wider considerations that affect their responses. These moral perspectives and actions are individualistic, based on how workers make sense of their

social experiences, and as opposed to inwardly-focused ethics, have the potential to foment social dissent.

People are socially motivated to adhere to norms and expected practices and to act ethically, both within their community of peers and with higher-status individuals who have influence over their lives. When working in urban households, domestic workers face ethical challenges, both by being constantly exposed to unattainable middle class consumption and its commensurate status, and discriminatory treatment from employers that reflect ideas about poor rural women. Although the workers also desire wealth, status, and to be able to afford the “civilized, modern ways” of the middle class, much of this is beyond their reach. Therefore, positive values like *zuoren*, moral uprightness, responsibility and empathy, which are not dependent on wealth and status, acquire additional significance. Workers do not have access to the resources and accumulated experiences that would allow them to be perceived as having higher status and high *suzhi* (quality), but they are still entitled to claim that they have raised their *suzhi* and that they base their actions on their conscience and principles of *zuoren*. Migrant work allows women to earn money, which in turn can be transformed into the food, consumer items, renovated house and more, which symbolize their love and dedication to their families. They can also access learning opportunities in the city, where they can learn from urbanites and exercise their own understandings of what it means to be an ethical person.

Rural women’s articulation of their own sense of ethics is ongoing, but hidden from the view of urban society. This point is important, because, except for the concept of *suzhi* which is often absorbed and refined after migrating to the city, rural people do not develop their ethical identities and practices in response or in resistance to urban stereotyping about backward peasants. Social and ethical shaping start early, so that by the time the women have migrated to Beijing, they can draw upon their ethical values for guidance when confronted with difficult situations, and when treated badly they can find solace in their knowledge of their own goodness and dedication to their family.

Part I of this chapter introduces *zuoren* (how to conduct oneself or how to be an upright person), which is a philosophical and ethical ideal that many workers aspire to, and examines concepts involving suffering, loss, and sacrifice that help workers pragmatically cope with the multiple oppressions they experience as poor women and lower-class migrant domestic workers. While Part I focuses on individual ethics, Part II

addresses the women's ethics in relation to their families and familial obligations. The imperative to fulfill these obligations causes many workers to believe that they cannot risk resisting subordination, since it could threaten their livelihood. Part III deals with workers' ethics and ethical identity in the urban context, both as compared to urban citizens and their rural counterparts. Migrant domestic workers who are frequently looked down upon by urban citizens suffer, sacrifice for their families, and work to improve their personal quality (*suzhi*). I cite from the accounts of many different workers in this chapter in order to build a more nuanced picture of how they articulate and define their ethical values and practices.

PART I CULTIVATION OF AN ETHICAL SELF

ZUOREN

Understandings about *zuoren*, how one should be or conduct oneself, or how one should be an upright person, are clearly influenced by social beliefs and public moral discourses. However, *zuoren* is to some extent individualized, as shown through the workers' accounts which emphasize different aspects of ethical behavior. Some women link *zuoren* with common ethical principles, while others highlight civility and manners. *Zuoren* is a specific attitude towards life, and a social and philosophical concept of an ethical, civil person and how this person should be as she interacts with others. It appears to originate from certain meanings of the older concept of *weiren*, such as how to conduct oneself in society and when dealing with affairs, or to indicate the characteristics of a person which are revealed through their countenance or moral character.¹²⁶

True Thought, True Speech, True Action

The workers' accounts about how one should act revolve around principled, ethical and responsible thought, speech and action. Wang Hui is from Chaohu, Anhui Province, and has spent 15 years working in Beijing despite being illiterate. She has found comfort and resolution in Christianity, which she converted to over 20 years ago, around the

¹²⁶ www.zdic.net, "Chinese Dictionary," Accessed on October 4, 2013, <http://www.zdic.net/c/jd/?c=a/e0/222677>.

time of China's opening and reform. Wang Hui sums up the ethical aspects of practice in being an upright person:

For *zuoren*, one should be a person of conscience, an upright (*tangtangzhengzheng*) person; you should put your heart in the center of whatever work you are doing. You shouldn't cheat people or talk irresponsibly, that won't do, just tell the truth. One should conduct oneself by telling the truth, and when you do things do your duty. Just be an upright person. Those of us who believe in Jesus Christ want to be a perfect person, a forbearing person, to be a believer in Christ. To *zuoren* one should speak the truth and act truly. Truth, principle, and being a true person (who has attained enlightenment), these three things are all important (*zhenshi, zhenli, zhenren*).

Wang, more so than others, touched upon the spoken aspect of *zuoren*; that one should be reasonable and responsible when speaking and not "engage in sophistry." Wang thinks that one should conduct oneself as an upright person at all times, but for other workers, telling the truth may depend on the situation and whether they want to risk upsetting their employers. Song Xiaoshan, a worker from Anhui who lives with her husband and children, said that it depends on her treatment. If the employer does not speak truthfully to her, then she will not speak truthfully, but if her employer is very sincere, she will also be sincere.

Lin Juan, a 39-year-old from Dongbei who works part-time and by the month, spoke about acting truly, based on one's conscience. One should not take advantage of others, or it will trouble one's conscience.

No matter what they are doing, I think a person should get by on their conscience, and not bring any harm to others. Whatever I do other people should approve of me, that I do right, and that I do well. If someone does something pretty selfish which just benefits them, then other people won't admire them after they do it, and furthermore people will talk behind their back, "what do you think?" So I don't want to do that sort of thing, but sometime this is not just on account of other people, but because I have my own way of doing things. I think I should do things so that it's ok for me, and it's ok for others too. But I don't want to do anything too selfish. For example if I was doing hourly work for someone and they gave me work that I could finish in two hours, I shouldn't take three hours to finish just to earn one more hour's worth of money. You shouldn't do that, but try to the best of your ability to finish in two hours...After you finish, the head of the family will be very happy and willing to pay you, but if you take that long to do this little work, they will pay your wages but won't be satisfied. And you won't feel comfortable about earning money this way.

Lin Juan mentioned the social repercussions of behaving selfishly. In saying “whatever I do other people should approve of me, that I do right, and that I do well,” her ideas about acting correctly and maintaining a clear conscience appear to intersect with what she sees as a collective or public ethics. It is clear that *zuoren* involves acting on principle and avoiding harming others, meaning that one should not just act for oneself.

Ethics of Restraint

Many workers are more pragmatic than Wang Hui about speaking the truth, but they frequently adhere to an ethics of restraint. In the eyes of these workers, an upright person should foster a disinterested approach to wealth and material goods, at least towards unattainable possessions. Domestic workers are constantly tested by the culture of middle-class consumption, and they come face-to-face with its objects on a daily basis while cleaning houses. It is not ethical to either have an intense desire for these objects or to steal them. Objects are not only a source of desire, but also danger and friction. When something goes missing, the women are often accused and the police are called, as in the one case when an employer had hidden the gold earring that she had accused the worker of stealing. The fact that many workers’ accounts mention the ethics of not stealing or taking things from their employers, suggests that there is a significant culture of suspicion surrounding workers and that they must act with this in mind.¹²⁷

Rang Hong focuses on the cognitive and emotive aspects of possession and desire:

One should be an upright, person with an individual character. To conduct yourself well, you shouldn’t always be talking about fancying expensive things. That is to say, always looking at what other people have and you don’t have, and getting angry. You shouldn’t be like that. You need to grow your aspirations, and move forward step by step. The way to conduct yourself is to not think about what other people have and then covet it. Other people’s things are still nice, but they aren’t ours. What people give us is with their kindly intentions. What people don’t give us, we shouldn’t take.

She suggests that one must think about one’s material desires and defuse these yearnings, instead of letting them dictate one’s thoughts and actions. *Zuoren*, much like some forms of meditation, is a practice of self-awareness.

¹²⁷ This awareness is also part of the self-disciplining that I discussed in the chapter on power. Workers should not only not desire these items, but knowing that they may be watched, they should allay their employers’ fears by demonstrating their ethical nature in other ways.

Xiang underlines the fact that despite opportunities, she would not take anything that belongs to others. She will only keep what she earns through blood, sweat and tears:

I came to the city...to earn money by dealing with hardships and inconveniences (*chiku shoulei*), I don't steal or rob from other people, I don't steal or take what belongs to others. For those of us who do domestic work, sometimes there's no one at home and they give you the key, and you go work in their home. Morally, when you are working in someone's home you shouldn't do anything, that's to say that even if they had thrown down a gold ingot on the table, you can't take what is someone else's. This is the type of person I am morally. What I earn is mine, but I don't take from anyone else.

Many workers say that it is immoral to take something that you want. Interestingly, their accounts do not only talk about refraining from stealing, but on working with one's initial feelings of envy and desire. This suggests that an upright person will ideally have worked on herself to the point of even resisting thoughts of temptation. She should not take advantage of others, but come by her gains honestly, which likely requires enduring hardships (*chi ku*).

Zuoren and Confucian Virtue

Certain aspects of *zuoren* find their roots in Confucian thought. For example, Chenyang Li states that Confucianism itself "is known as a 'person-making (*zuo ren*)' philosophy."¹²⁸ The virtue of *zuoren* is related to altruism and consideration for others. For example, Lin contrasts her own actions with those of people who thoughtlessly start cursing as soon as they open their mouths. Unlike them, she says she does not bad-mouth anyone. Lin emphasizes the importance of empathy and putting yourself in others' place. If you curse at other people, you should judge their feelings by how you would feel. To be virtuous then, one must extend one's concern to others.

Confucian altruism has an almost identical concept, *shu*, which means that one takes one's own feelings as an indication of how one should treat others.¹²⁹ Some western

¹²⁸ Chenyang Li, "The Philosophy of Harmony in Classical Confucianism," *Philosophy Compass* 3, no. 3 (2008): 428.

¹²⁹ Donald J. Munro, *A Chinese Ethics for the New Century: the Ch'ien Mu lectures in History and Culture, and Other Essays on Science and Confucian Ethics*, Ch'ien Mu lectures (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2005), 51.

literature on morality also examines the importance of feelings or emotions.¹³⁰ Mencius created a theory of Four Commencements which involved, “four kinds of feelings, namely compassion, shame and embarrassment, modesty, and discerning right and wrong.”¹³¹ Li Jinglin, a sociologist of religion, cites philosopher Zhu Xi regarding the link between compassion and these other feelings, which presumably could also lead to action, “Compassion is like brains, from which shame and adverseness, modesty and the discerning of right and wrong need to originate.”¹³² Many workers view compassion and sympathy as fundamental to the ethical person.

One can still see the impact of gendered Confucian concepts in Song Xiaoshan’s account of her mother telling her how to become a dutiful wife and loving mother (*xianqi liangmu*). Her mother believed she should learn how to sew, raise children, cook and clean in order to follow the three subjugations and four virtues (*sancong side*) of the ideal woman, learn how to speak calmly and good-humoredly, how to treat villagers and to maintain a harmonious relationship with neighbors. However, Song does not seem to have adopted her mother’s suggestions. Her own idea about *zuoren* is more developmental than moral. She thinks that one should grow and accumulate experience year after year, and no matter what one’s ideal is, one should always move forward and develop oneself such as by reading books or watching programs on the legal system.

Training the Conscience and Good Behavior

Among my informants, and likely among Chinese people in general, the values of *zuoren* are understood to be taught or cultivated, rather than being innate. The first three examples below are responses to questions about how parents teach their children to conduct themselves. They suggest that guidance is eventually internalized, forming one’s initial conscience and leading to good behavior.

¹³⁰ Oakley, *Morality and the emotions*: 53. Justin Oakley suggests that emotions like sympathy and compassion provide impetus for one to act morally; they give one the “strength of will” to do good or to avoid doing what one thinks is bad.

¹³¹ Li, “Mencius’ Refutation of Yang Zhu and Mozi and the Theoretical Implication of Confucian Benevolence and Love,” 158.

¹³² Xi Zhu, *Zhuzi Yilei*, (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuji, 1986), 289, cited in Li, “Mencius’ Refutation of Yang Zhu and Mozi and the Theoretical Implication of Confucian Benevolence and Love,” 158-9.

Rang Hong commented,

I would say to my child, “you need to walk an upright path.” If a child is used to something from the time they are young, they will have a good habit. You shouldn’t scold people or call them names. You don’t want to do immoral things. She will slowly, slowly be able to walk the correct path.

In Cheng Tao’s hometown, children used to take some peanuts or dates from the fields to eat as they went on their way. Some of the children were poor or had no one at home to look after them. Regardless, Cheng’s parents maintained a strict interpretation of how one should not act, and wouldn’t let her “steal” snacks, or do anything that took advantage of others. In this case, it is the act itself that is ethically wrong, in terms of taking what belongs to others without permission, rather than the person’s need or the low value of what was taken. The parents of another worker, Zhang Hong, taught her not to participate in anything hidden, illicit or immoral. Their advice relates to Xiang’s comment regarding earning an honest living through hard work and hardships (*chi ku*).

Since I was young, my mother told me that at minimum we must not do things that break the law...you shouldn’t do things furtively, but you should rely on your own efforts to earn money. In society, some things that are done furtively and that aren’t moral, we won’t participate in.

Despite earning little, the fruits of one’s labor are truly earned, and one should not think about taking from others even if they have more than what might be considered their fair share. Lin Juan emphasizes the social aspect of *zuoren* as she talks about how she learned these values, which she then taught her son:

Even though my parents were quite poor, I think they are good and kind, and they are also quite moral people. They were of great help in every aspect [of teaching us *zuoren*]. When I went to school the teacher would also often teach us how to be good people, how to do things that are beneficial for society and that benefit others, that one shouldn’t be a selfish person. Frequently spending time with these people had a big impact on me. So naturally, now I teach my son in this way, how to be willing to help others, how not to discriminate against people or bully people. I said that some people have troubles and we should try to the best of our abilities to help them; this is what I teach my child.

Lin Juan’s *zuoren* is largely relational and involves forethought about the personal and social impact of one’s actions. Lin’s teaching her child to be compassionate, just as her elders planted the seed for her ethical behavior, underlines my prior comment that migrant women do not just “learn” their ethics from urban citizens.

Tang Ming poetically illustrates how one's conscience is the embodiment of internalized morality and values.

It seems that how someone should *zuoren*, the question is too big. Regardless of whether you have a top-level profession or a low-level one....I think that one should rely on one's conscience (*liangxin*). How to *zuoren*, the first thing is morality, and then values (*jiazhi*), then you should put your conscience in the middle. You don't want to violate your own conscience.

Tang Ming's quote suggests that this assumedly cultivated conscience, with its implicit morals and values, should dictate behavior in society and the workplace. Her emphasis on the conscience suggests she may see it as an inner voice or intuition.

Zuoren is an individual's ethical approach to life. But it is also conveyed through parental teachings, ideas about virtuous behavior and doing no harm, and societal expectations which are congruent with expectations for compliant, selfless domestic workers.

SUFFERING LOSS AND SACRIFICE

When workers feel powerless, how do they cope with their losses? As I discussed in the previous chapter, subordination itself can induce women to tolerate loss, but I have observed that they also frame their losses in terms of gain. Loss and gain have particular meaning within the Chinese context. Both *chi ku* (bearing hardships) and *chi kui* (suffering loss) discourses are employed by workers, not so much to discuss moral change or self-improvement as to frame hardships and loss in a different light. While suffering and loss are acknowledged, the loss is hopefully not in vain. Even enduring hardships can be seen as admirable and ethical, insofar as that they are tolerated in order to cultivate *suzhi* and to fulfill familial obligations.

For domestic workers, loss within the workplace can pertain to: their lack of freedom within a household, exploitation or loss of wages or their job, restrictions on socializing or their freedom to contact friends and family and receive phone calls, loss of health from poor nutrition or grueling physical labor, the loss of "face" and their dignity, and much more. On the other hand, in addition to their wages, they can potentially gain physical and intangible benefits such as knowledge and experience, *suzhi*, mentoring by their employers, extra gifts and bonus pay during the holidays, and they hope, respect and appreciation of their work.

Within Chinese culture, the concept of “face” is pervasive, and it is often expressed in terms of gain and loss, or giving, keeping or losing face. Domestic workers, as the subordinates within the employer-worker relations who are expected to assume an obedient attitude, are the ones who must take face into consideration. They must also, as they say, literally “watch face” (*kan bieren lianse*), that is, watch the expressions on the faces of their employers and their reactions to assess how they themselves are doing, and whether they are overstepping any boundaries or doing something wrong. In addition, the workers must give the employers “face” to some extent, and obey them even if they believe them to be too exacting, picky or wrong. Workers are attuned to employers because they constantly receive cues and verbal or non-verbal feedback, so they easily pick up on disparaging behavior. In order to keep their jobs and earn their pay, workers often cope with this behavior unless it crosses the limit of what they are willing to tolerate. When the women are talked down to, they lose face. They may choose however to put on a “smiling face” and hold back their anger.

In this chapter, I will focus on bearing hardship and loss through *suzhi*, *chi ku*, and *chi kui*. In contrast to *zuoren* which dictates how one should behave towards others, *suzhi* signifies a quality that a person possesses or lacks, but which they can gain or improve. However, like *zuoren*, it can also be used to characterize a person based on their behavior. One’s quality is directly linked to one’s origin, class, social location, and experiences. Tamara Jacka notes that the term is flexible but:

it focuses concern on the attributes of human beings and how to improve them, and diverts attention away from deficiencies and inequities resulting from structures, institutions, and practices either created, or endorsed by, the state.

[It has also been] mapped onto a geography of social and economic differentiation between the poor “backward” rural hinterland and the urban cities and coastal provinces.¹³³

Hence rural people and migrant workers are understood to have low *suzhi*, and they are supposed to gain *suzhi* through their labor (*chi ku*) in the city and learning from urbanites. When migrants first arrive in the city, they not only find out that they can possess *suzhi*, but that they are considered deficient in *suzhi*. Only one of my informants criticized the role of the state in failing to address or contributing to the inequalities that led to low rural *suzhi*. Hairong Yan notes that the state has reinterpreted the problem of poverty to be, above all, a lack of culture and *suzhi*, or a poverty of “human subjectivity,”

¹³³ Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*: 41-42.

which can then be addressed through the migrant work that transforms peasants' *suzhi*.¹³⁴ This appears to place the blame on rural people for their own poverty, and makes them accountable for improving their own deficits. This is akin to a Chinese version of the American tenet promoting individualism, "to pull oneself up by one's bootstraps," which means that one should succeed by dint of one's own effort.

Chi ku or bearing hardships (literally, "eating bitterness"), which is usually inspired by familial obligation, and necessitated by poverty and lack of power and resources, is unquestionably part of migrant life. Migration has offered them the opportunity to earn a better living, so they choose to *chi ku* for their families. As migration is at least in part a deliberate and individual choice, it could be considered an ethical act to endure hardships to help one's family. As Tamara Jacka pointed out, workers pursue "self-development" through suffering and struggle, but the discourse serves the interests of the state and the market economy.¹³⁵ My informants used *chi ku* to connote suffering, but also as experience that strengthens one and benefits one's family. The *chi ku* trope assumes that employers who demand hard work and pay little are the norm. Domestic workers would be fortunate to find a profitable situation in which they do not have to work extremely hard. They have little else that is marketable besides their labor, so many believe that *chi ku* is the only way. The disassociation between *chi ku* and those who benefit from their cheap labor, marks a lack of socio-political consciousness. Some workers instead try to view *chi kui*, or suffering losses as positive. At times, workers will accept their losses, more rarely they will act to regain what they literally or figuratively lost. With *chi kui*, the workers accept their losses either because it is considered an ethical action to accept the loss or to avoid conflict, or because they feel powerless to do otherwise.

PART II ETHICAL SELF IN RELATION TO THE FAMILY

Domestic workers, and particularly married women workers' "ethical selves" or ethical beliefs, identities and practices, are tightly bound to their families. The ethical obligation to support their families directly impacts their decision-making and experiences within the workplace. In this part of the chapter, I discuss the motivations

¹³⁴ Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*: 122-23.

¹³⁵ Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*: 262-66.

that underlie familial obligation and the hardships that poor migrants are willing to tolerate in pursuit of their ethical aspirations.

FAMILIAL OBLIGATION

As women who often feel that they have not had the opportunity to make the most of their lives, domestic workers shift their aspirations to their children. They want their children to be happy, well-provided for, to have better opportunities than they had, and to be well-behaved and moral. For impoverished people with few resources, a focus on the family necessarily generates a theme of self-sacrifice, as evidenced in the *chi ku* and *chi kui* discourses.

Most domestic workers expressed their goal as providing for their families' well-being. This norm is a common and expected moral behavior which can compel people to make choices that predominantly benefit their children, and posit self-sacrifice as a positive ethical action or a virtue. This is not to say that self-sacrifice is always seen as noble, but it is at least extremely common within this particular group of rural parents. Their choices are also colored by the prevalent focus on fulfilling certain needs; basic needs such as food, and education and marriage.

These latter two needs in particular, are fundamental to what constitute a valued member of society. It is hoped that education and financial resources will allow the children to have easier lives, and prevent them from suffering like their parents. Many of the migrant women need to earn money to pay for the house that is usually a prerequisite to their son's marriage. Parents would not want their son to remain unmarried, and they are under pressure to have him marry within the limited time in which rural men, and especially women, can marry with relative ease and without unwelcome speculation. Marriage is a necessity, whereas education is seen to contribute to what type of person one is, to their social and economic status, and to their *suzhi*. *Suzhi* (human quality) is a Chinese concept which has been promoted by the state, elites and the middle class. Poor migrants face a great challenge in being able to articulate a morality and lead an ethical lifestyle which is recognized and valued by urban citizens, in part because of the widespread prejudice and stereotypes about "low-*suzhi*" rural people, or people from certain provinces.

Filial piety and familial obligation have shifted in the last few decades, and there has been a movement away from the multi-generational household. Migration, as well as the desire of a couple to have their own household after marriage, has separated families, altered familial responsibilities, and left many elderly people insecure. This topic is of concern to married domestic workers over age 30 who earn money to help their children, but who have no savings for their old age, and worry that their children may not take care of them when their time comes.

Domestic workers' accounts about familial obligation strongly reflect their own feelings and efforts on behalf of their parents, children and daughter-in-laws. When talking about the ways in which she saw herself as a good person (outside of the workplace), Han focused on her respect and devotion to the older members of her family:

For example, in my home I am kind-hearted towards my parents. Regardless, I am also good to my relatives; I will treat your mother like my own. Every time I go home, I will show my respect to them all day until late; that is to say, I treat them better. That's how I think about it...you are old, so I'll be a bit kinder, show more respect, then we will also become old. Every person goes through this process of becoming old, and one should learn [about this], so I'm really filial now. It would be really bad if after I get old, my daughter-in-law isn't good to me. People should judge another's feelings by one's own.

Although Han has a young child and is only 30, she is already worried about the uncertainty of her future.

Zhang Hong shares Han's concern. In her case, she is worried about her son and daughter-in-law repaying her kindness and sacrifice. They all live together, but need to move to another house. She gave her savings to her son for his marriage since he had not saved anything and did not have a good job with which he could have earned sufficient money. She is therefore destitute, and dependent upon his earnings for her new home and immediate future:

I'm a pretty amiable individual. Take our daughter-in-law, I try my best to treat her like a daughter-in-law, she's part of our family, right, I try my hardest to be good [to her]. However she acts towards me is her own affair...I'm very anxious to act a certain way towards older people that you, being young, don't even think about. I'll give you something to think about, it's up to you whether to listen. For example the house, prices are rising and you have money, you've emptied me out but you [son] have money, you should buy the house.

In many families, the mother-in-law's influence over their son's wife has diminished, and as in the above example, is sometimes virtually reversed. With decreasing filiality in many younger people, many middle-aged and elderly can only hope their children will not abandon them. This poses a potentially serious problem for rural people, the majority of whom receive no pension.

Tao Lin revealed that she was driven to migrate principally because of her fervent desire to be filial and pay her respects to her parents. Years ago she was sick and was laid off of work. She needed money for her daughter's schooling and to build a house. Since her mother had passed away, her father took care of her and her siblings. She knew he would realize that she was in need and would lend her the money. Tao was ashamed that she was over 40 years old and instead of paying respects to her father who was over 70, she was borrowing money. It upset her that she was acting against convention, or what she thought was right, and she regretted taking the money:

I wanted to migrate in order to earn money. Even if I have to deal with hardships away from home, that's ok. If I have to deal with troubles, that's ok too. I can earn money for my child to go to school. After that I will present gifts and show respect to my father.

For Tao and others, migration is not just because they want to provide for their families, but because the provision itself is part of their concept of being ethical people. Tao's migration has also been prompted by her relationship, as for many women who want to escape broken marriages and unhappy family relationships. As previously mentioned, she remarried a man who sees her as tainted by her former marriage. Tao's account shows that she herself decides how to construe her familial obligations. Providing for her parents and child are central, but because of her second husband's inability to come to terms with her past, she need only visit a few times a year to maintain their relationship. In regards to family, Tao does not act ethically just because it is expected; she seems to demonstrate her allegiance when she thinks it is merited.

Domestic workers' ethical identities in relation to the family involve self-sacrifice and care, as well as the desire to be cared for in their old age. These ethical ties bind family members with love and obligation.

CHI KU AND FAMILIAL OBLIGATION

Chi ku means suffering and making sacrifices, usually in order to earn money and provide for one's children. Some women see it as the only way they can get ahead. Although they agree that it is not bad to experience some hardships when young, they are willing to suffer so that their children will have an easier time. Tang Jia, a sweet, energetic young woman who is Su's younger sister, had a discussion with her father-in-law about who would go out and work. Although he volunteered since she had small children at home, she thought he was too old.

When you go out to work you really have to exert yourself. There are a lot of difficulties going out to earn money. But I'm young. I can *chi ku* a bit. My health is fine, I can endure it. I'm afraid he wouldn't be able to endure it. So, that's how I came out [to the city].

Tang Jia says "*chi ku* means earning money to raise your family." She defines herself in part by her capacity to suffer hardships, and is proud of her ability to support and care for her extended family, including buying clothes for and giving money to her in-laws. Although she may argue with her in-laws, when all is said and done, "I treat my mother and father-in-law the same as my mother." The *chi ku* discourse and its association with familial obligation not only provides a compelling reason for migration, but can contribute to workers' determination to stay and to endure difficult situations. Because the workers sacrifice for the sake of their families, compliance can ultimately be seen as an ethical choice.

PART III ETHICAL SELF IN THE URBAN CONTEXT

SUZHİ

In contrast to familial obligation, *suzhi* is focused on the individual and her place in society. Scholars have written about the social and political roles of *suzhi*, its role in citizenship, new modes of governance, its relation to neoliberalism and its use as a cipher of an individual's social value. It is used by everyone from policymakers to migrant workers, the presumed bearers of "low *suzhi*."¹³⁶ Ann Anagnost comments that

¹³⁶ Ann Anagnost, "The Corporeal Politics of Quality (*Suzhi*)," *Public Culture* 16, no. 2 (2004); Jacka, "Cultivating Citizens," 523-35; Andrew Kipnis, "Neoliberalism Reified: *Suzhi* Discourse and Tropes of Neoliberalism in the People's Republic of China," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13(2007);

suzhi has “been extended from a discourse of backwardness and development (the quality of the masses) to encompass the minute social distinctions defining a “person of quality” in practices of consumption and the incitement of a middle-class desire for social mobility.”¹³⁷ Tamara Jacka comments that it has evolved into “a powerful form of governmentality based on pressures towards self-regulation and self-development that are internalized among the people as much as they are imposed by the state from above.”¹³⁸ While middle-class *suzhi* chasers are born into a favorable environment and can afford to cultivate certain experiences like education, migrants can only build it through bitter labor and it continues to define their unequal relationship with city dwellers.¹³⁹ I suggest that *suzhi* generally reflects the various qualities that may be attributed to one from birth, including for example, a rural background and all that it implies, as well as what one gains in intellect, morality and other qualities from the process of accumulating experiences. I agree that the *suzhi* discourse pushes workers from above and within towards “self-regulation” and “self-development,” but *suzhi* is not their sole ethical motivation, it is only one part of a broader set of ethical pursuits.

Rather than only engaging with mainstream or national-level discourses on migrants’ *suzhi* or socio-economic and socio-political interpretations in the literature, my discussion will focus more on what *suzhi* means for migrants, and particularly on its ethical importance. I have divided the workers’ accounts thematically to first address *suzhi* that is commonly associated with one’s acquired education and knowledge, and secondly to delve into the more cognitive, ethical, self-work that overlaps with *zuoren* (how one should be). I use the word “self-work” to replace the Maoist “thought-work” (*sixiang gongzuo*). Whereas thought-work was extensively implemented pre-1989 by the State to change one’s ideological perspective to a “correct” one, self-work is an internal, voluntary, individualistic process of changing oneself in pursuit of being a better person.

Wanning Sun, "Suzhi on the Move: Body, Place, and Power," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 17, no. 3 (2009); Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*.

¹³⁷ Anagnost, "The Corporeal Politics of Quality (*Suzhi*)," 190.

¹³⁸ Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*: 42.

¹³⁹ ———, "Cultivating Citizens," 525, 31.

Some of the most prominent indicators of low *suzhi* are rural origins and lack of education, which are also associated in dominant popular discourse, with poverty and unethical actions like stealing, or attitudes of rudeness and self-centeredness. From the perspective of the state, media and urban citizens, migrants are tainted by the assumption of low *suzhi*, which not only deems them to be inferior, but as capable of low-*suzhi* behavior. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Wanning Sun discusses the discourse of risk ascribed to migrants that promotes suspicion, monitoring and surveillance. She suggests that migrants are subject to Foucauldian discipline both by the hand of the state and the employer.¹⁴⁰ Tying the discourse on *suzhi* together with that of migrant risk in the public imagination only enables and legitimizes the subordination of migrants. Hairong Yan describes the *suzhi* discourse as ideologically central to the State's efforts to harness peasants as migrants. Since the 1980s, rural people's "low *suzhi*" has been linked to their "backwardness" and lack of development, which is seen to adversely affect China's development. Therefore, peasants are supposed to recognize their faults and rectify them by becoming industrious laborers for the urban economy.¹⁴¹ Incongruously, migrants are considered to have low *suzhi* particularly if they do not recognize their shortcomings, and do not buy into this developmental *suzhi* discourse. Ceding control and accepting their backwardness and inferiority is a step forward on the path to higher quality. This situation stands in contrast to Yan's description of the free-wheeling, free agent Wuwei workers in the 1980s who changed jobs frequently and would band together against bad employers.¹⁴² The *suzhi* discourse has gained in potency since then and has been in large part accepted, including by many domestics. Yuan Dong and Xuejia Xu write, "The *suzhi* of peasants' ethical consciousness still needs to be raised. In a number of places, concepts about clan and the region are deeply rooted, feudal superstition is widely adopted, and negative ways of thinking and outmoded ways and habits gain the upper hand, and seriously impact the rural economy and social stability."¹⁴³ This way of thinking simply affirms the power and bias of the developmental discourse, and underscores the scapegoating of the peasants.

¹⁴⁰ Sun, *Maid in China*: 128.

¹⁴¹ Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*: 113-31.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 132-33.

¹⁴³ Yuan Dong, Xuexia Xu, "'Nongmingong Chengxin Gongde Yishi yi Rucheng Wenti Tanxi" (The Issues of the Awareness of the Public Virtue of Integrity among Migrant Workers Entering Cities)," *Lanzhou Shangxueyuan Xuebao (Journal of Lanzhou Commercial College)* 25, no. 4 (2009): 71.

Although many domestic workers share popular views on the low quality of rural people, they do not necessarily accept it as a totalizing discourse. Perhaps because they are from the countryside, they do not judge their rural comrades as readily, and are more likely to take the context of their actions into account when assessing individual behavior and worth. In the interviews, many workers only ascribed low *suzhi* to certain people. One woman linked it to poor upbringing, another described low-*suzhi* people in their hometowns as “sketchy, questionable, or sticky-fingered.”

For others like Tang Ming, low *suzhi* is not just linked to the migrants or their low education. Tang Ming’s following account reminds us of how important historical context is for understanding someone’s actions.¹⁴⁴ Tang Ming’s acquaintance, Hong is only two years younger than herself. Hong’s grandfather had starved to death during the Maoist era, and she too had been starving at times. Coming from a life marked by instability, hunger and illiteracy, Hong became ruthless about working to make sure her children are educated, and Tang Ming knew that she stole things from her employers. Tang Ming explains unethical behavior within the context of poverty and minimal education:

I say that if you have low education, with low education it is inevitable the poor will turn into bandits. You have no way to live, but you have to eat, you need to clothe yourself, there’s nothing else you can do. The country doesn’t look after you. Then they (migrants) came out and [now] they can be influenced by people of high standing. They aren’t aware of their own errors. They don’t even have a little bit of legal awareness. If you take other people’s valuables, if they aren’t [that] valuable then others will just pretend that they didn’t see. But if they are really precious, as soon as they are lost, people will suspect you and have you investigated, and you’ll certainly be imprisoned if you are above 18. Hong didn’t have this awareness; she didn’t know what the consequences would be. She’s such a simple person.

Tang Ming critiques the State’s neglect of rural development; low *suzhi* is the result of a process whereby inequality, deprivation and lack of opportunity foster conditions for poor behavior like stealing. In a few words, she paints a striking picture of a world in which there are no real alternatives for the underprivileged. Maria Jaschok indicates

¹⁴⁴ One apt illustration of this point is the artist Song Dong’s exhibit, “Waste Not.” He created a show with a staggering number of old objects and trash from a Chinese household, spread around multiple rooms. Only upon learning the context does the viewer gain a deep perspective which elicits horror and compassion. The objects were collected over 50 years by Song’s mother, who had saved every morsel of soap and scrap of fabric to get her family through the impoverished Maoist years, and who was so deeply affected by her family’s suffering and poverty, that ever since she has been unable to throw away her possessions and even trash.

Shui Jingjun's emphasis on the current neglect by the educated elite of the "long and sacred Confucian tradition...which demands that knowledge and privilege must serve the cause of the people, particularly the most marginalized and neglected among them."¹⁴⁵ In considering these two viewpoints, both the government and the elite have morally neglected to help the people who most need it.

I suggest that Tang Ming also considers it important to have an educated morality, one that is shaped through formal learning and experiences that elevate one's *suzhi*. This includes an understanding about the possible consequences of one's decisions. She speaks about Hong almost as though she were a child. To Tang Ming, Hong has an immature understanding which prevents her from taking full responsibility for her actions. Here, Tang Ming's tone seems to align with the public discourse about migrants' *suzhi* and Wanning Sun's discussion about media representations of maids as doing foolish, irresponsible and sometimes dangerous things.¹⁴⁶ However, the media does not take the maids' history and treatment into account like Tang Ming does:

This is a serious blunder that is an ethical violation, but she didn't realize it...So I'm worried that if I say not to take things, and she takes something, then as Chinese people say, "the first time you take other people's small belongings, you'll have your way, the second time you take bigger things, you'll also have your way, if you succeed a third time, you will dare to steal more. You'll think that this is really easy; I don't have to work hard. Then the more you steal the bigger the things get, and ultimately you'll end up in prison."

Tang Ming, as is the case with many workers, does not accept the *suzhi* discourse relating to rural people wholesale; she frames low-*suzhi* behavior with her legal and socio-political knowledge. Although rurality, lack of education and poverty are strongly connected with lack of *suzhi*, it is a social problem that cannot be laid at the feet of the migrants themselves. However, as we will see later, she does believe that at one time, her own *suzhi* needed to be refined through interactions with urbanites.

Suzhi, Ethics and Self-Work

As I have already indicated, some scholars suggest that not only does the *suzhi* discourse function ideologically to conceal the exploitation of migrant workers, but that

¹⁴⁵ Deborah Fahy Bryceson et al., *Identity and Networks: Fashioning Gender and Ethnicity across Cultures* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), 123.

¹⁴⁶ Sun, *Maid in China*: 141.

as it is defined, workers cannot attain the same sort of *suzhi* as the middle class.¹⁴⁷ I suggest that in practice, workers have not limited their *suzhi* development to, for example, what they can attain as workers contributing to a nationalistic project of development or in response to top-down pressure for self-development, but draw upon *suzhi*'s Confucian, philosophical roots.¹⁴⁸ Rather than just building their *suzhi* through migrant labor, the women believe that they can access *suzhi* through a process of self-work and by learning self-reflexivity. Furthermore, they do not need expensive, high-status experiences to achieve this type of quality. The process might be initiated in the cities when they realize what high *suzhi* is, and it can be initiated by others, but the workers deliberately choose to cultivate themselves as they do with *zuoren*.

Domestic workers do not just work on their own quality, they also judge others' low *suzhi*, such as when their employers are guilty of such acts. Since employers tend to be more educated, there is a sense that they should know better, unlike Tang Ming's acquaintance. Zhang Shufen, a 53-year-old widow from Heilongjiang whose children have both finished college, recalled hearing about some really low-*suzhi* employers when she worked in Guangzhou. Treating their maids harshly, the family made them eat separately and fed them leftover food. They would also shout and argue with the maids. Once Zhang Shufen worked late cleaning for a male client who then refused to pay her for all her work. She was "as mad as a hornet" but let it go because he had been drinking. He lived in an isolated area, and since there were no more evening buses and she was reluctant to spend the money she worked so hard for, she walked back home. Employers' actions stem less from lack of education than from moral shortcomings, as conveyed through some workers' suggestions that the low quality of employers is often related to their attitudes or how they treat others inhumanely.

Society-at-large may judge rural *suzhi* in public arenas like the media, a quality which is based on rural membership, whereas migrants' discussion of others' *suzhi* is hidden from the public and certainly from their employers, and is based more on individuals' actions. While Zhao An waits in the employment agency during her downtime, she and others share their opinions and pass judgment on the stories they hear and the workers who pass through. "Sometimes it was the employer whose *suzhi* was no good, but there were also maids whose *suzhi* was really low." Zhang Shufen suggests that migrants hold informal "courts" in private where quality and ethics are

¹⁴⁷ ———, "Suzhi on the Move," 624-27; Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*: 120-24.

¹⁴⁸ Jacka, "Cultivating Citizens," 525-27.

assessed. Employers may suspect they are being talked about, but the discussions happen behind their backs. Ironically employers demonstrate their own low *suzhi* by believing domestic workers to be inferior and treating them as such. Xiang points out that everyone is different, the middle-class is not automatically endowed with quality. “Some people take you as (stereotyped characters). Like the low-status people who are written about in books, they consider you to be a dirty, lowly sort of person. But some people see how much work you do for others and treat you very well.”

Low-*suzhi* behavior in domestic workers is not limited to acts like stealing, but also encompasses their attitudes and treatment of others. My interviews revealed another perspective on *suzhi* that melds with *zuoren* (how one should be), in which quality requires thoughtfulness, purposeful self-cultivation and self-control. People who have low *suzhi* may act impetuously or without regard for others. This overlaps with Hairong Yan’s description of common perceptions of migrant women as being *shahuhu* (clueless) and imbecilic, “impl[ying] that she appears to have no consciousness of her self-in-the-world, that she does not recognize her position in the order of things and her own inadequacy.”¹⁴⁹ This woman does not recognize her own low quality, her need to improve herself, or her need to fulfill her duty as a competent and respected migrant worker.

Many women believe that they can raise their *suzhi* by living in the city and working hard, but for them, *suzhi* is not just based on their role as laborers. *Suzhi* is not just learnt through imitation and assimilation, but is cultivated. It is relational, ethical and personal. The following stories illustrate how *suzhi* is not attained by acting upon one’s immediate desires. Instead, self-work which involves control of the self, should be consciously pursued. The first example provided by Xiang, supports common beliefs about quality. She was struck by the difference in civility between the countryside and the city. “Beijing children are so polite. One should go to the city to learn from others, you can’t learn that in the countryside. If you step on someone’s foot in the city, you apologize and that’s it. However, that wouldn’t be the end of the matter back at home; the people would end up arguing about it.”

Tang Jia, Su’s sister, talks about elevating her *suzhi* through her experiential education in the city. When she was still in rural Henan, Tang Jia did not really understand etiquette or what was taught in school, but now she has learnt from her

¹⁴⁹ Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*: 128.

“teachers” (the staff) at the housekeeping agency, from working in people’s homes and from watching television. She agrees that people are motivated to migrate in order to improve their quality. Whereas they can spend a year or two in the countryside without any change, after spending a few years in the city in contact with high-*suzhi* people, they can learn and change a great deal. She herself has become more tolerant (*kuanrong*) towards people and can try to understand them. “I think that when I first came out, I didn’t understand anything. Now I feel that I can first think about other people, to consider why other people act as they do, and then think it over again.” Tang Jia and others interpret their own enactment of *suzhi* as beyond what urban employers’ *suzhi* might entail. Instead of just involving demonstrations of kindness or appreciation, her type of *suzhi* requires action at a cognitive level, deliberating and thinking about other people’s actions before responding. Tang Jia also looks for genuine quality in others. She says that she can tell things about her clients from their speech, and draws upon an old proverb, “quality is tested in the long run; time reveals a person’s heart.” Over time she can tell when her employer says things that are nice to hear, whether she sincerely means well towards her, or whether her employer is just mouthing the words. If one is genuine towards others, one’s actions will reveal it over time. *Suzhi* here, characterizes how a person is, which is perceived partly through their actions towards others.

Qing Yi, a fashionably dressed young woman from a small town in Gansu, contrasted her own actions with those of some low-*suzhi* rural women. She described a type of woman who lacks *suzhi* and education, who is a coarse, rough, argumentative person who acts impetuously, and who is willing to swear at your mother or even scratch your face. Qing critiques these people who act based on their desires, perhaps in contrast to *zuoren* or how people “should act.” She herself defers to her husband who has greater education, and he always reminds her, “you can’t just do what you want, you have to control your disposition a bit.”

Qing then told a story about helping others to improve themselves. I only later realized that she had told me a story about Su, who is also a friend of hers. Qing had to spend a few days at the agency, and Su was there crying, having just left behind her home and newborn with her abusive husband. Qing felt sorry for her and tried to comfort her, “Don’t cry. It’s not easy being a woman. I moved to Hubei for my husband. It wasn’t easy. I’ve never said anything excessive to him. But you, Su, don’t spare him or let him get away with anything, then he could certainly hit you.” For Qing, practicing *suzhi* entails “sparing” others, and controlling oneself to act reasonably and moderately.

In response to her critical comments, Su said, “eh?!” and hit her. Qing told me, “I could have also hit her, but I didn’t.” Su then said some unpleasant things. Qing told her, “It’s not all smooth sailing, if you can let it go, then just put up with it. Maybe there’s something wrong with you? You should do some soul-searching. Don’t always think it is other people’s problems.” Su was even more upset, and said “Divorce!” Qing then attempted to calm her down, and asked her out to eat. After spending some time together she then sent Su on her way back to her husband, which was purportedly successful.

Returning to her self-analysis, Qing said, “I always do things through deliberation. [I think to myself,] this can really hurt someone, so I shouldn’t say this.” Ironically her statements to Su sounded accusatory, and were not supportive for someone who had to abandon her newborn child while fleeing abuse. By contrasting her own way of thinking with Su’s, she also implies that her own *suzhi* is higher. In talking about rural women, Su, and her own practice, Qing emphasizes forethought, self-discipline and cultivation, which then reflect one’s *suzhi* through action. She was not against divorce in all cases, but felt that Su could try harder, instead of being like the rural women who think of themselves and act in haste.

Su talks about the change in her *suzhi* in a similar way. When she first migrated to Beijing, she said she had no *suzhi*. She went to the bank to send her wages to her parents, but wrote the money order wrong, and was so embarrassed that she went outside, ripped it up and tossed the pieces on the ground. An older woman saw her and told her that she should pick it up, and she would watch her do it. Su attributes this event, when someone cared enough to coach her, to her starting to change. When Su talks about the transformation of her *suzhi*, she phrases it in terms of gaining a greater appreciation of life, loved ones and being content with one’s destiny. She does not completely blame herself for past choices, as everyone has experienced hardships and has a past, but if she could choose again she would have cherished her first job, where she was mentored by her elderly employer, and she would not have run away to Beijing after she found out that her husband was not what she’d expected. She would have chosen love over work at that time. She views her *suzhi* as representative of her maturity. This description adds a moral and caring aspect to *suzhi*, whereby practicing consideration and appreciation of life and of those dear to one, can avoid rash actions.

These examples suggest that quality is achieved through repetitive practice or experience over time, it is internalized and not just put on for show. When one has *suzhi*, one is aware and informed about life, and will not act maliciously, immorally, or rashly without thinking of the consequences. There are negative aspects of the *suzhi*-building process which emphasize migrants' development through *chi ku* (bearing hardships). The way that Su talks about her *suzhi* shifts it from being exploitative to relational. Overall the practice of *suzhi*-raising encourages workers to be thoughtful rather than impetuous, and to exert their agency to build their ethical quality.

CHI KU HEROISM

Chi ku (bearing hardships) heroism is a potent discourse affecting migrant domestic workers. Both employers and many workers believe that the job requires this sort of hardship and sacrifice. Sometimes workers refer to *chi ku* as necessary to earn money, and sometimes their narratives reflect an image of a model worker who is virtuous because of her willing dedication to menial work. Zhang Shufen's thinking is more pragmatic,

I think because we don't have any other abilities, we do this line of work, domestic work, and it's essentially a form of manual labor, it's not a form of mental work. If we need to *chi ku*, I think it's understandable. It's to earn money and just for living.

Chi ku can be the way that a migrant worker survives and makes a living, but for Tang Ming and others, it describes their fearlessness and willingness to do the most humble work.

We domestic workers, we came out, and so we bear hardships...but any sort of work is fine, you just have to let us do it, it's part of our job. We will go to clean, we will scrub whatever is dirty, and if it's really dirty we're not afraid.

Zhao An is even more graphic in describing her work:

I think *chi ku* means earning money. I suffer hardships because I earn money; I have to pay back a debt. I can suffer whatever hardships. I go to clean people's houses and if there is a tampon lying on the floor of the bathroom, then I lean over to pick it up for them. I use a brush to clean the toilet. I scrub it until the inside is completely clean. To earn money, I'm not afraid of working hard.

Qing Yi captures the feeling of the heroic peasant. When I asked her whether *chi ku* is a good thing, she said yes it is a good thing for those who have no education. She thinks it is glorious (*guangrong*).

All these women's responses are those of "model domestic workers." Qing Yi however, is willing to *chi ku* only for good employers. She said, "if you have a good attitude then I will suffer hardships for you till I'm exhausted. If you don't have a good attitude then I won't, I will only take good jobs." She protects herself from the worst in migrant work, where the worker is both treated badly and expected to *chi ku*.

The final two examples show how heroic workers are praised by others. Wang Lei says,

The *laoshi* ("teacher" or staff at the employment agency) really overestimates me. Whatever work there is she will certainly ask me to do it because I do a good job. If you don't work well, then you are just muddling through. Other people won't ask for you. I'm at my agency from 8 till 5 pm. When I'm at the agency, the boss tells me that they've never seen anyone like me. I work the entire day and I do it well. The *laoshi* keeps calling me about more work. And the *laoshi* is happy because I work well and she earns money (from it). Whatever I agree to do, I will certainly do it well.

The final example demonstrates the desirability of the tireless and hardworking maid to employers. When Su was taking care of the disabled grandmother, the elderly husband defended Su to his daughter, who resented Su's high wages.

This elderly grandfather said, "in spite of Little Su's youth, this child has actually really been able to *chi ku*. So many maids have come to our house, and when they see grandmother's diarrhea and vomit, like when she vomits from dizziness, they don't want the job. And look at Little Su here who cleans up grandma's excrement without even wearing a facemask." He said that before when their maid changed grandma's diapers she would wear disposable gloves. I said, "If you don't suspect me of being dirty when I cook food, then I won't wear gloves." They said it is fine not to wear gloves. They had explained to me that it cost one *mao* per glove. Anyways when you earn money from people, you need to take their direction.

He praises Su because she did not shy away from what would disgust others. She displayed virtue in not wearing protective gear, but approached the work with humbleness, and saves them money (approximately three cents per pair of gloves). Just as *suzhi*-building is considered a different process for migrants than middle-class people, *chi ku* for migrants is different from what urbanites would want for their children.

Urbanites’ experiences of “eating bitterness” (*chi ku*) might entail intellectual labor or refined *suzhi*-building activities, but migrants’ *chi ku* just involves physical labor and dealing with the dirty and degrading. Tamara Jacka addresses female migrants’ experiences as “trial by fire,” exploitative and demeaning work which is supposed to lead to development.¹⁵⁰ *Chi ku* heroism is a false friend to workers when it condones this type of work.

These accounts reflect traces of Hairong Yan’s depiction of *chi ku* as part of the developmental discourse that suggests that migrant women can succeed if they eat sufficient bitterness. Through hardship one can save enough and improve one’s *suzhi* enough to succeed.¹⁵¹ The heroic maid figure is both a needed allegory for coping with making one’s living in the lower echelons of urban society, and fits in neatly with urban needs and practices.

CHI KUI

Chi kui is a Chinese concept that ties together ideas about loss, suffering and eventual reward within a social context. It is defined as suffering loss, getting the worst of something, being at a disadvantage or coming to grief. The most commonly used meaning among my informants is “suffering loss.” The way that *chi kui* is spoken about often has moral implications for the person who suffers loss. The loss may be partly voluntary, or the person may do anything to avoid it. Suffering loss within a work context is more disempowering, because the workers often feel they have little choice but to let employers get away with cheating them. A few workers try to involve the domestic service agency or the police, but it is not worth it if only a few RMB are at stake. This may be more of a psychological than financial loss, because workers know that employers can use their power at any time to deliberately short-change them. However, suffering loss among friends or family can be a political decision, a conscious sacrifice, or a sign of compassion, although there may also be social pressures to gracefully accede.

Multiple workers have quoted an adage about *chi kui*, albeit sometimes laughingly. Yan said:

¹⁵⁰ Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China*: 264-65.

¹⁵¹ Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*: 200-01.

In China we have an old saying, that suffering loss is a blessing. *Chi kui* is a good thing. You can't always take advantage of others. Always taking advantage is a bad thing. So if you have the opportunity, *chi kui* is a blessing. If you have this frame of mind, it will let you think about any misconduct philosophically.

Although she giggled at the saying, Yan was more serious when discussing her interpretation. Clearly, putting a positive spin on losses helps one to cope. One can view both *chi ku* and *chi kui* as having moral benefits; they provide a frame within which hardship or loss can often be imbued with value. In other accounts, we will repeatedly see these understandings about the positive aspects of loss.

Tao Lin is clearer about the moral dimension of *chi kui*, insofar as that goodness will be rewarded eventually.

Where I'm from, my understanding is that suffering loss is a blessing. If there are two people who want to stop each other, with these two people something is sure to happen...one person will come to grief (*chi kui*). A person can't always have such good luck forever...and it's [also] not possible that one will suffer losses for his whole life. If you suffer loss once or twice, it doesn't matter. That's what I think. Good people will have their reward. And evil people will also definitely receive their punishment.

Her belief in this moral justice may be a way of creating comfort, order and justice in a world where she and others are often taken advantage of. The Just World Hypothesis, attributed to Melvin Lerner, underlines this rationale:

Individuals have a need to believe that they live in a world where people generally get what they deserve. The belief that the world is just enables the individual to confront his physical and social environment as though they were stable and orderly...The justness of others' fates thus has clear implications for the future of the individual's own fate. If others can suffer unjustly, then the individual must admit to the unsettling prospect that he too could suffer unjustly.¹⁵²

If one will be repaid for one's goodness, migrants have an incentive to be good. As the underdogs in society, they also want to see a more moral society where justice is upheld. In the Just World Hypothesis, people may go so far as to blame the victim for causing the injustice, in an attempt to construct a rationalization for the unexplained injustice. However the injustice that migrants suffer is not inexplicable, and they do not

¹⁵² Melvin J. and Dale T. Miller Lerner, "Just World Research and the Attribution Process: Looking Back and Ahead," *Psychological Bulletin* 85, no. 5 (1978): 1030-31.

automatically blame their victimized co-workers. This may be because workers are aware of the misfortune and injustice that many of their colleagues have faced.

The need to believe in something also ties in with *chi ku*, because migrants need to believe that suffering hardships will be worth it, that their lives will be improved through migration despite their sacrifices, and sometimes estrangement from their families. Migrants hold the hope of upward mobility, that they can do better and raise their *suzhi*. There is a natural inclination to hope that *chi ku* and *chi kui* are not pointless, but will pay off in some way down the line. Rang Hong says there's no need to always be so calculating, but it's also not a good thing to always *chi kui*. As a positive example, she spoke about how she and her husband assumed a larger portion of costs than they needed to, in order to help out her in-laws. Suffering loss appears to be good for building *guanxi* and good will, and possibly for strengthening kinship relations. Tang Jia is also willing to suffer for others: "I don't think I've really suffered loss. Anyways I'm the type of person who would rather suffer some loss myself; I'm not willing to let other people suffer losses." Her *chi kui* is an ethical act of self-sacrifice.

The final two accounts of Lin and Zhou Cao critique the women's own relatives as vehemently unwilling to suffer loss. Lin tries consistently to be good to her brother's wife who appears to be thoughtless and self-focused, but is never repaid:

She never helps others. That's her disposition. If she can profit a bit, that's alright, she's happy, she'll laugh about that. But if she has to *chi kui*, that's no good, if she suffers losses, she'll just leap up and eat you alive. That's what her disposition is like.

Lin continues,

There are boundaries to the losses I will take, right? You can't say that I just benefit from others, but it's not possible that I would let you profit from me every day, it's also not possible to suffer losses every day. Now people aren't stupid, they are very clever. They have evaluation, a standard, they judge [things].

Lin is saying that there should be a healthy balance between give and take. Since people are clever, when they deliberately make the decision to never *chi kui*, like her brother's wife, it reflects on their character. The wife's poor character is shown through her lack of familial concern and display of antagonism instead of grace when put at a disadvantage. Although Lin shows that she is willing to act without benefits, she also

does not want to be taken for a fool. There is a limit to what she will tolerate, as there likely is for all workers.

Zhou Cao suggests that one's attitude towards suffering loss is indicative of one's character. She contrasts herself with rural people, like her petty and bullying in-laws and how they *chi kui*. Her experiences in the city have given her a different perspective as well:

I'm not like those people in the countryside who are not farsighted. They can't foresee things; they only see this short distance in front of their own eyes. As long as they don't *chi kui* it's alright. They say that as long as they don't suffer losses financially or whatever, it's alright. They try to think of a way and calculate things about you and then profit off of you, but I'm not like that. I say that if I suffer losses, I suffer losses. And then if you profit off of me, you profit off of me. I just want to bring up my two children, and then after they graduate from college, then that day all the tiredness I've endured doesn't matter, as long as that day is good, then that is happiness.

Chi kui from family members also has to do with being a good person and letting others benefit rather than always pursuing the final advantage oneself. Zhou Cao does not suggest that she actually benefits from relatives taking advantage of her, but as in *chi ku*, she looks ahead to her family's future happiness. Since she is not like her relatives, one can assume that she chooses to *chi kui* because she is more ethical than they; she will not try to profit from them.

Zhou continues to talk about *chi kui* in the context of employers, and one can see how her tone shifts depending on the situation:

It's difficult for you to avoid coming across a bad client. If you encounter one then you encounter them, such as if they say some really awful things. If you say a few offensive things back and you are angry...they can [decide to] not pay you and pressure you, if they don't give you it (money) then they simply don't give it to you. If they give less, then they give less, that's how it is. If we suffer loss, we suffer loss, just for a couple of RMB we can't say that we are going to sue them or go to the authorities; it's not worth it for our few RMB. We can only say that we will *chi kui* and won't profit. I've encountered that before; they embezzle part of what you should be paid for your time. That happens a lot.

Zhou is resigned in both cases to suffer losses, but when employers cheat her, there is no apparent upside. Presumably, with fellow villagers and in-laws she at least has either

guanxi (relationships) or kin relations. But with clients who hire by the hour, she has no relationship, she is just exploited.

With *chi kui*, the person who gains the advantage is sometimes cast in a negative light by the losing party. Also, when people take more than they should, they compromise their own ethical standing. Acting unfairly towards others who do not have the power to resist indicates a lack of morality, as seen in Zhou’s example when employers take advantage of her. She realizes that it is her right to be paid fairly for her time, and that these employers steal from her. This type of *chi kui* is demeaning and exploitative, unlike *chi kui* within *guanxi* networks which presumably can be more of a “blessing.” The interpretation of *chi kui* clearly relies on the context and the relationship with the person who benefits most. It is possible that when some live-in domestic workers suffer losses, like being underpaid, that they obtain other benefits like trust or job stability. *Chi kui* can be considered a total loss in situations like with Zhou’s bad clients. When workers suffer a needless loss, they could recast *chi kui* as a blessing, hoping that this karmic sacrifice will bring a future good.

CHANGING ZUOREN THROUGH WORK EXPERIENCE

Some workers think that they have both raised their *suzhi* and improved their ethical practice (*zuoren*) through work. Tang Ming’s account below is particularly interesting, because as one of the more expressive, thoughtful and socially astute workers, her self-reflections coincide with the conventional discourse on migrants’ quality and development.

When asked how her *zuoren* has changed through her experiences in the city, Tang Ming reveals that she has changed from someone who would speak up for herself to someone who can tolerate anything. She appears to see this as a positive change. Her work skills have also improved greatly over the years. When growing up her grandparents would not let her work, so she first learned how to cook and clean as a domestic. She was shy and did not speak much with her elderly grandparents, but had to learn to chat with her elderly clients while she cleaned, also because if she failed to respond to them, they assumed she was arrogant. Now she loves talking.

Before, if someone cursed me a bit or told me off, aiya, I wouldn’t let them get away with it, I would say “that won’t do, how can you say that to me!” I really

wouldn't be able to endure it. Now it seems that I've learned how to be thicker-skinned. When other people say things it doesn't hurt my feelings, it's not a big deal. I'm very forgiving, I can be really tolerant, [whereas] before I wouldn't allow any of it...Now I'm completely able to endure it...

I've gone into many different households, those of artists, businessmen, doctors, editors, and ordinary people, I came to know their financial status, how they lived etc. I've improved myself a great deal, [now] I understand how they are. [They teach me] their ideas, and instill a great deal in me. Before, I thought that I knew best, I thought my own opinion was the best. Now I think that my opinion is by no means good. I have too little social experience. I think other people's opinions are better. How they raise their children, how they go work, how they take part in different undertakings, how they conduct themselves, I've learned a lot of this and also how to deal with things, and how to converse. Although I don't earn much money, it seems that my experiences have really increased.

Tang Ming's description suggests that being "told off" must happen with some regularity. It is particularly striking that although she used to stand up for herself, and critiqued the state for its part in people's low *suzhi*, like Hong's, she has now grown to accept being told off and allows people to get away with treating her as though she were inferior. This account suggests that Tang Ming agrees with the public discourse about migrant *suzhi*. She emerged from the countryside unskilled, but through work learned how to communicate, work well, and relate to others. Through her willingness to submit herself to "modernity," to being taught by urbanites, she has learned of her own "ignorance." She portrays herself as initially being unknowing, unskilled and righteous, but has adapted to the urban environment in her role as a domestic worker, and is more humble than ever. Her rationalization about her paltry salary reiterates the critique about a dominant *suzhi* discourse, in which inequality, poor wages and exploitation are glossed over by the emphasis on migrants' urban learning and development experiences. This shows the complicated and insidious nature of *suzhi* whereby she blames the state's neglect for when rural people commit unethical acts, yet privileges the knowledge of urbanites and dismisses their unethical treatment of her. There also seems to be a different *suzhi* for urban and rural people in which education and knowledge trump ethical behavior. She can hold herself and her colleagues accountable, but not the individuals from whom she learns.

My conclusion is that with *zuoren*, we have two concurrent discourses. In the first, just narrated by Tang Ming, there is an overlap with *suzhi*, in which the worker is educated by her experiences in the city and is humbled, as suits her presumed place in

urban society. There is an obvious gap between her accounts of her individual ethical conscience and previous self-advocacy and how she now sees herself as a migrant worker and tolerates a degree of poor treatment in the workplace without complaint. It could be because although she may blame the state for certain people's inability to access *suzhi*-raising experiences, she still believes that it is best cultivated in the city. It could also be because she chooses to ignore poor behavior at work, since she has far less agency to deal with it there than in her private life. Tang Ming's exposure to urban norms also seems to have affected her own definition of *zuoren*, or how she should be in relation to (urban) others.

The second *zuoren* discourse leaves one free to practice *zuoren*, with no need for the trappings of wealth, education or status. Most of the women at least referred to this type of *zuoren*. Their idea of *zuoren* is principled and timeless. *Zuoren* cannot be bought, and one can acquire it whether one is wealthy or poor. One can choose to be a better person, regardless of how society values people with wealth. These two discourses inevitably intertwine and often collide for migrants living in the city. Migrants internalize the former discourse to some extent, but also claim their own agency in developing themselves. Both discourses, however, emphasize the responsibility of the individual to be an upright and ethical member of society.

CONCLUSION

Domestic workers' practice of ethics within and outside the workplace is actively shaped by their relationships at the level of the family, work and society. Ethical behavior in the Chinese context for female migrant domestic workers and many others, entails sacrifice, willingness to suffer hardships and loss, and a perspective which focuses on others. The desire to be an upright person (*zuoren*) supports the practice of compassion and sympathy for others, and judging others' feelings by how you yourself would feel.

Much of the women's lives involve sacrifice for their families. The workers often treat their older kin as they would want to be treated, and they model filiality for their children. *Chi kui* (bearing loss) with kin can demonstrate one's magnanimity, so the women sometimes choose to take losses for others. Unwillingness to ever *chi kui* can strain kin relationships, just as Lin and Zhou Cao judged their relatives to be greedy and

self-centered. Migration itself involves sacrifice for the good of the family, particularly when the workers leave their families behind. In practicing “familial obligation,” many women spend all their savings on their children, leaving themselves without the option to retire. Self-sacrifice for migrant women either involves some form of privation to benefit their families or acquiescence in the workplace. The women feel ethically obliged to sacrifice for their families, and obligated to acquiesce to subordination when they feel there are no other viable options.

Domestic work often involves enduring hardships (*chi ku*) and a sacrifice of dignity and autonomy, such as when the workers are talked down to or when they are micro-managed. Live-in workers lose their privacy, personal space and time. They *chi ku* mostly for their families, but their employers appreciate when they are model workers, willing to engage in dirty and hard work. The *suzhi* discourse involves physical and psychological sacrifice, and the willingness to be disciplined and shaped by urban employers.

The *suzhi* discourse not only focuses on the individual but her ability to govern herself and become a well-behaved, contributing member to society. As discussions around *suzhi* suggest, migration can be a formative experience where “eating bitterness” and learning morals and manners from urban residents (*zuoren*) can raise one’s quality. *Chi ku*, as “eating bitterness,” also improves one’s ability to deal with life challenges and helps one appreciate the “sweet.” In Tang Ming’s example of *zuoren*, over time she has adapted to the city and now is able to tolerate anything including people cursing at her. She has also learned from others and humbly finds more value in their opinions than her own. Workers train themselves to not covet or steal. These examples suggest that improvement requires facing physical, emotional and ethical challenges, and likely demoting oneself in comparison to one’s urban counterparts. In Tang Ming’s account, her perceived improvement in character shifted her from self-advocacy to relative silence. Higher *suzhi* comes with recognizing one’s lower place. Although the women engage in ethical self-work to improve themselves, these changes are compatible with the conventional and expected role of domestic workers.

We can draw conclusions about how the ethical discourses and norms that influence workers’ ethical identity and practice, could manifest in the workplace. They do not provide any clear moral foundation for resisting immorality, but rather provide a sort of code of conduct for people to aspire to act correctly, responsibly, and ethically, and to

exert self-control. They encourage a particular type of autonomy and development which noticeably omits an emphasis on individual rights, justice and protecting oneself. The way the workers define doing right, instead often seems based on abstaining from doing wrong and causing harm to others. *Suzhi* can be used to critique people who subordinate others, but gaining *suzhi* can instead involve tolerating subordination, and the application of the other Chinese norms and discourses is also unlikely to challenge oppressive structures and practices.

The workers try to appreciate what they have, and try not to covet what belongs to others. These ethical ideas stand in contrast to messages of consumerism and individual ambition held by the middle class. This simply serves to highlight the differences between the middle-class and migrant versions of *zuoren* and *suzhi*. The workers' comments address a type of ethical development and code of conduct that cultivate relationships and their responsibilities as participants in urban society.

Ethical domestic workers are far from the urban stereotype of impetuous rural women who act without thinking and sometimes aggressively. They are defined by moral rectitude, compassion and thoughtfulness but they are also marked by their humility and ability to *chi ku*. Their ethical aspirations and explanations help them to negotiate urban ordeals and to try to improve themselves as individuals. They also emphasize virtuous action which is frequently tied to sacrifice. The impact of shaping one's life ethically with these values and practices, including when workers become able to "tolerate anything," focus on self-work, avoid harming others and avoid conflict, and accept the necessity of "eating bitterness" and "suffering loss" as migrants, is that these women are left poorly equipped to advocate for themselves. While they attempt to refine their ethical practices with inwardly-focused self-work, they are less likely to be attuning their moral lens to respond to injustice. However, they are able to see themselves as developing and improving through their experiences, moving away from rural stereotypes, and a bit closer to becoming part of urban society.

CHAPTER 5

EXPLORING WORKERS' MORAL PRACTICE AND RESPONSES TO IMMORALITY

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores morality and immorality as directly and indirectly expressed through domestic workers' accounts. Whereas the last chapter focused on inwardly-focused ethical self-work, self-control, and how one should be an upright person in relation to others, this chapter explores an outward-focused morality, studying how people critique others through a moral lens, and respond to others' immoral actions, both within the workplace and at home. Ethical identities involve "virtuous" responses to subordination, avoiding conflict and causing harm to others, whereas this chapter's treatment of morality addresses how workers think about and respond, in particular, to immorality. When a few workers respond by pursuing justice, they brave conflict, risk "harming" others, and relinquish exactly the type of "self-control" I discussed in the last chapter. Others respond similarly to workers in the last chapter who sacrificed themselves for the sake of their families. Moral assessment and decision-making are individualized processes, which although influenced by domestic workers' common lack of power and social location, vary depending on an individual's moral learning and moral standpoint, perceptions about justice, and motivations. I first discuss workers' moral learning and the moral process, or respectively, how they see their moralities evolve, and how they move from the moral evaluation of subordination to action. Through the women's illustrations of these moral dilemmas and wrongdoings, I will identify and analyze their moral motivations, critiques and praxis. I address how workers' moral perspectives impact their decision-making and acts of resistance or acquiescence.

Moral understandings support and shape how they lead their lives and reflect upon themselves as social beings. Jarrett Zigon, who wrote about morality from an anthropological perspective, suggests that morality is not a set of rules, but a social practice reshaped by experiences and "the acquired attitudes, emotions and bodily dispositions of a person throughout their life. A moral person can be both morally self-

critical as well as critical of her social world.”¹⁵³ I define morality as an individual’s socially influenced beliefs and practices broadly associated with what they consider right and wrong and good and bad, which have been shaped over a lifetime, but which are dynamic and may change with new experiences and information. Morality encompasses the socially influenced values that act as a lens through which one can construct, evaluate, and maneuver through one’s social universe. Rather than addressing how people’s actions are circumscribed by ethical norms and discourses, I will focus on how people actually think about morality. Descriptive morality contrasts with normative ethics, which concerns how people ought to act. Descriptive morality studies the codes of conduct that are put forth by various groups or a society. However, it can even be used to describe an individual’s moral beliefs and what they do as a result of what they think is right or wrong.¹⁵⁴

Importantly, even though domestic workers may encounter similar situations, they may judge these situations differently, act differently and may also have different rationalizations for their behavior. An individual’s moral judgment, the nature of her particular situation, and other important considerations all influence her behavior and whether she continues working, quits or resists in some way. In this chapter, in addition to exploring these individual local moralities, I will attempt to elucidate commonalities that tell us about the moral experience of a group that is always subordinate in the workplace.

THE MORAL PROCESS

In the study of morality and social psychology, the disjuncture between moral judgment and action has long been debated, as well as how one comes to moral judgment.¹⁵⁵ It is true that one cannot predict how an individual will always act in response to a particular situation like discrimination, because there are many other factors at play besides an individual’s moral judgment, such as who discriminates and why, what the worker’s

¹⁵³ Zigon, *Morality*: 17.

¹⁵⁴ Bernard Gert, "The Definition of Morality," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2011), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/morality-definition/>.

¹⁵⁵ Fiery Cushman, Liane Young, and Marc Hauser, "The Role of Conscious Reasoning and Intuition in Moral Judgment: Testing Three Principles of Harm," *Psychological Science* 17, no. 12 (2006). This study looked at subjects’ judgments based upon scenarios. I suggest that when using scenarios to look at conscious or intuitive decision-making, the subjects will react differently and justify their reasoning differently if they are imagining a situation that does not apply to them, than if they were in a real life situation and responding to an actual moral dilemma. My analysis is based upon such real life examples.

resources and job opportunities are, and how she views her ability to act in her own interests at that time. Nonetheless, I suggest that there are visible connections between an individual's moral deliberations and her response to immorality. To start, I will deliberate about the moral process, which I define as the process of moving from using a moral lens to appraise or describe a situation (moralizing), to judgment, then to action or inaction. The moral process is an often intuitive and rapid process of which individuals are not always fully conscious. This idea of a partly intuitive process of moral reasoning is based on Jonathan Haidt's social intuitionist model of moral judgment.

[This model] suggests that moral reasoning is frequent, but given the speed and ubiquity of moral intuition, moral reasoning rarely has a chance to play out in an open and unbiased way...Rather, people engage in moral reasoning primarily to seek evidence in support of their initial intuition and also to resolve those rare but difficult cases when multiple intuitions conflict.¹⁵⁶

Haidt's social-psychological theory divides moral thinking into the automatic and more emotional moral intuition which may then be followed by the conscious and less emotional or affective process of moral reasoning.¹⁵⁷ Zigon's ideas about moral reasoning overlap with Haidt's model. Zigon uses the term "moral breakdown" to address the situation in which something intrudes on a person's consciousness so that she has to examine it and think about an ethical response, as opposed to a sort of "habitus" which he defines as "an unreflective and unreflexive disposition of everyday social life."¹⁵⁸ The concept of moral breakdown has some utility in pinpointing the situations that trigger deliberate moral thought about a situation and (re)action. However, I suggest that moral dissonance is a more accurate way of describing what triggers conscious thinking about a situation. Rapid, partly unconscious moral intuition is a part of moral dissonance. Domestic workers may have experienced more incidences of moral dissonance than the average urban citizen, since the women are always responding to requests and commands and are often treated as socially inferior. Live-in workers who change employers frequently or part-time workers who continuously have new clients could have even more experiences of moral dissonance because new employers are not familiar with the individual women, and so may treat them more dispassionately. Domestic workers may be accustomed to certain variations in their work and interactions with employers, but they would still pick up on statements, tones

¹⁵⁶ Haidt, "Morality," 69.

¹⁵⁷ ———, "The New Synthesis in Moral Psychology," *Science* 316(2007): 998.

¹⁵⁸ Zigon, *Morality*: 17.

of voice, and actions that are dissonant and may indicate discrimination or condescension or which may be patently unjust.

Although the moral process is frequently quick and intuitive or habitual, when faced with moral dissonance or a troubling situation, individuals will often consciously reflect on their own moral standards among other things, and come to a decision. This decision-making has an emotional component. If, for example, they feel very uncomfortable or demeaned, these feelings inform them that something is wrong. If workers judge their employers' actions or attitudes to be immoral or intolerable, they must also decide at what point they should react, if at all. This decision is not just expedient and decided by one's situation, but will also reflect back on the individual's moral identity. There are therefore multiple factors involved in the moral process: routine and instinctual judgment, deliberate pragmatic judgment based on one's perceived choices and limitations, the influence of one's moral standards and identity, and the tension that can arise when submitting to treatment one believes to be wrong and unjust. This tension would arise when one fails to react or advocate for oneself in line with one's beliefs. If one is morally wronged multiple times, this recognition would likely feel disempowering and could be detrimental to one's sense of moral agency.

What are the implications of domestic workers' moral process? Moral judgment is also a philosophical process of rationalization and explanation, and of locating oneself in relation to others. When an individual recognizes that she is being treated poorly and immorally, her mind logically seeks to explain how and why. One seeks to place the blame somewhere, whether it is assigned to the perpetrator, to oneself, or to socio-political causes. Some workers recognize that their dehumanization, as well as their experiences of discrimination and exploitation, arise from social inequality and the commodification of workers. When treated as inferior, many workers intuitively understand that employers must think themselves superior. When they are treated as hired labor rather than individuals who possess feelings and personhood, workers can conclude that these employers only consider their instrumental purpose—how long, hard, and well they can work. This conclusion emerges in some accounts of workers' dehumanization, when they compare themselves to slaves or servants, or ask why they are not treated like people. Workers can develop a sense about why they are dehumanized as well as directly experiencing its effects. Moral dissonance triggers thinking which can contribute to their socio-political consciousness about subordination. Workers do not necessarily need to have been subordinated to gain socio-political

awareness, since they have sufficient shared understandings about domestic work, employer relations, and a group identity, that they can comprehend what others go through. This also means that moral dissonance can be activated when hearing others' stories.

Workers see firsthand what their employers think of them, whether it is good or bad. The following aspects of immorality surface in Nick Haslam's explanation of Martha Nussbaum's aspects of dehumanizing behavior: "'instrumentality' and 'ownership' involve treating others as tools and commodities; 'fungibility' involves seeing people as interchangeable with others of their type...and 'denial of subjectivity' involves believing that their experiences and feelings can be neglected."¹⁵⁹ When workers are not fed sufficiently, or are made to work excessive hours or without rest, employers treat them "instrumentally," as commodities, or as labor. Many bad employers are known for frequently changing workers. In this case workers are "fungible." The domestic worker who believed that she had built a close relationship with her employer, and who therefore felt betrayed after her employer abruptly brought her to the employment agency and for a replacement, saw this action in Nussbaum's words, as a "denial of [her] subjectivity." It is important to look at how workers view what they see as immoral treatment, since their perceptions influence how they are psychologically affected by the treatment, as well as how they respond to it.

Workers' views on immoral treatment can be examined through their narratives, which are vehicles for meaning, shaped by their emotions and moral perspective. Mark Tappan finds that there is a compelling need for stories to have "moral meaning" and following from Hayden White's analysis of narrativity, claims that narrating is moralizing, "a narrative, therefore, attempts to endow a sequence of events with the kind of legitimacy and meaning that would justify and sustain the moral perspective on behalf of which it is written or told."¹⁶⁰ Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin, he also imbues the act of authoring a story with authority. Moral authority comes from the "internally persuasive discourse" which occurs when one takes ownership of the words that have been "assimilated" throughout one's life and takes responsibility for one's perspective

¹⁵⁹ Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1999), cited in Haslam, "Dehumanization," 253.

¹⁶⁰ Mark B. Tappan, "Narrative, Authorship, and the Development of Moral Authority," *New Directions for Child Development* 54, no. Winter (1991): 9.

by putting the story in one's own words.¹⁶¹ Moral critique clarifies and reinforces the workers' moral position and orientation in their account through the telling.

Feng Zhilian, a 37-year-old mother of two from Gansu, talked about how some employers treat their maids like people, but others do not; they just pay you and make you work. She had to stand behind the dining room door while her employers ate, then she could eat. She was made to work so hard on a regular basis that one day she passed out on the floor, unable to move for two hours, and ended up in the hospital.

Every day in the morning there was a small *mantou* (steamed bun) that was only this big. Every morning [they said as a reprimand], "you can really eat, you can really eat." I felt really awkward, how could it be like this, this person's words, to eat that little bit of *mantou* and [for them] to act like that, and I do all the work for your family. Giving the elderly lady a three-hour bath, wiping and cleaning her body takes three hours, washing makes me sweaty and how come I'm eating so little? I couldn't talk about it, I felt out of sorts, when I went home I got sick, when I got sick I went to the hospital, my emotional stress was too much.¹⁶²

The repeated experiences of grueling work and deprivation of food, topped by her physical and emotional breakdown, provided the moral dissonance for Feng Zhilian to critique her commodified labor and dehumanizing treatment.

Workers' recognition that at times they are treated immorally and with impunity can have different outcomes; either action, or the realization that they cannot change their situation. Moral critique is the one potentially powerful tool that workers always have. It is their right to claim that as humans they should not be treated immorally. A moral critique can be a temporary source of comfort when they share it with others, but it is not necessarily transformational unless it supports workers to advocate for themselves. The act of moral critique identifies the present treatment of domestic workers as unacceptable and illegitimate. When workers say that they would prefer to be treated well and have good work relations rather than be paid a higher salary, they emphasize that their humanity should be recognized, and their dignity cannot be bought.

¹⁶¹ M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), cited in Tappan, "Narrative, Authorship, and the Development of Moral Authority," 11, 17.

¹⁶² Workers who are deprived of food by their elderly employers or charges may still not be driven to take food without their permission. Many elderly employers keep a careful eye both on expenses, counting the pennies that are left over, and on food, as seen in Tao Lin's account of the white cucumber in the trash bin. What is important is that workers like Feng Zhilian know they are not supposed to take more food, and they feel that they cannot.

LEARNING MORALITY: MORAL PRACTICE, DELIBERATION AND CHANGE

In this section, I will present three different snapshots of how workers view their moral learning, in their private lives, community, and the workplace. Evaluating one's own morality is a conscious reflection on how one judges and assesses others, and clarifies what it means to be moral and good. Two of the accounts show that workers' moral perspectives can shift significantly depending on their experiences, which in turn affects the choices they make in life. There is therefore an alignment between changing moral perspectives and consequent behavior. I will also discuss the elements of socio-political consciousness which emerge from workers' accounts of their evolving moral selves.

Tang Ming spoke of an earlier period of despair and questioning that had changed her life. She had been profoundly shaken during the period of SARS and the avian flu, and said that people no longer knew how to live.

People's life no longer had meaning, and after that when I came to believe in Jesus, I was ok. I thought, aiya, this life has meaning again, life is not about money, and living is not why you work. Before I was so foolish, and I lived to work, it seems like I thought that with work you can earn money, and with money you can support your family. Life was just that simple. But this life was without an objective, you just think about living today, tomorrow, and you don't really know anything more. After I read the Bible, it was interpreted really clearly for me. Now if SARS comes again, I'm not afraid. I know what I'm living to do.

Tang Ming had constantly felt afraid of dying, and people were alienated and suspicious of each other. Even her own sister acted fearful when she coughed. She reached a point where she felt numb with fear and worry for her children. Tang Ming's conversion to Christianity was a turning point after which her life gained meaning. Prior to SARS, her mother and sister had tried for eight years to convert her unsuccessfully. Tang Ming's own experiences led to her new faith, which changed her attitudes and moral practice and opened her up to helping others. In retrospect, she sees her life as having been without direction and deep significance, characterized by her pursuit of money, albeit for her family. She had lived from day to day without a higher moral purpose.

Tang Ming's moral epiphany had a profound effect on her behavior and shifted her focus from herself, her work and family, to others. In the last chapter I mentioned how she used to stand up for herself, but now tolerates people when they say things that hurt her feelings. She now sees her clients as having higher *suzhi* and more valid opinions

than her own. This means that she is now more likely to remain silent when her clients say condescending or discriminatory things. However, Tang Ming's new sense of purpose and moral stance are also founded upon her socio-political consciousness. She has criticized the State for not doing more to help poor and uneducated people, and she tries to be empathetic and charitable towards those who are in even worse circumstances than herself. Now Tang Ming takes in needy strangers, such as first-time migrant women who have trouble finding work, and shares her limited resources and her 300 RMB per month room.

Lin told a story that she thinks reflects upon her moral learning. First she introduced the key character, a native Beijinger who lives in a nearby multi-story building, and who gossips constantly about how they (Lin and other poor migrants) who live in the one-story flats are outsiders. Lin does not speak to her, but she indicates that she has learned a moral lesson from observing this woman's prejudiced behavior. Her neighbor seems to draw a line between people based on their wealth and status, which is denoted by whether they are Beijingers and where they can afford to live. Lin then describes how when living in single-story flats, she is constantly in contact with people. As soon as she opens her door, she has to be ready to greet people, and she sees people every time she goes to the common bathroom. "As soon as you leave your home you come across every type of person, and you learn so much. Sometimes you can tell what people's shortcomings are, and people's strong points, you learn all this from the way that you come in contact with others." Having mentioned that in multi-story apartment buildings one can go without seeing others, she insinuates that these wealthier Beijingers lack similar opportunities to learn and refine their moral lens. In selecting these details, Lin indicates that moral learning through social exchange is valuable, and that her neighbor suffers moral shortcomings precisely as a result of her wealth and perceived superiority. In this case, an urbanite can be more disadvantaged than migrant outsiders. Despite her negative feelings about hearing what her neighbor says, she does not try to intervene to stop the hurtful gossip. I previously discussed how Lin emphasizes harmony in relations. She is aware of when she encounters subordination, but because of her focus on avoiding conflict and maintaining harmony, she keeps her anger to herself and puts on a "smiling face." The account about the Beijinger also highlights her socio-political consciousness about the roots of her neighbor's discrimination. She can engage in moral critique because of her own ostensibly more enlightened social relations, but Lin's critique does not seem to lead to any

transformation of her relations, particularly those in which she is directly or indirectly subordinated.

Domestic workers' habits, perspectives, and moral understandings may undergo considerable change within the workplace. When Su evaluated her moral change in the workplace, she observed how her way of thinking has changed. The change involved a lessening of moral judgment and greater pragmatism. In the past, she had complained of not being allowed to eat the same food as her employer or of having gone hungry, but now she says that she thinks about it differently. Su no longer condemn her employers or think that they are bad people for depriving her of the better quality food that they themselves eat, like milk, shrimp, eggs, and meat. Instead, if Su is hungry or does not get enough food, she will tell the employer, but no longer has "high" expectations about what she is fed. She went through a calculation with me, and said it would cost approximately 15 RMB per month for eggs and 60 RMB if she drank milk, which she rounded up to 100 RMB (\$16.34). She said, "100 RMB, would you go as far as to ask for that? You work for people and in return they give you wages, they don't offer you that sort of thing."

Su no longer sees the deprivation of food solely through a moral and socio-political lens. Previously, such a deprivation was a sign of her dehumanization; it was unjust treatment which drove her to secretly "steal" some of the food for herself. The word "steal" indicates that although she lived in their household, food was considered the property of her employers. Whereas some new domestic workers expect that employers will acknowledge their need for food, sleep and rest time, Su has become accustomed to the norms and expectations that certain employers hold for domestic workers. Employers who skimp on workers' needs tend to view their relationships in a more utilitarian way, as wages for labor. Su has lowered her expectations and now sees the decision to give workers cheap food as practical, and apparently shares the view of employers who perceive hiring, housing, and feeding of domestic workers in terms of money rather than care. She has therefore accepted the commodification of her work and to some extent, the depersonalization or dehumanization of workers. This view is consistently promoted when certain employers subordinate domestic workers, and by the service economy itself, so it becomes that much easier for workers to assimilate this viewpoint.

In the same account, we see another perspective of Su's. In order to obtain better treatment and care, she advocates doing everything possible to please employers. This could be considered a strategic decision to act ethically in order to achieve desired outcomes. This behavior goes beyond doing a good job, and includes emotional labor. Su advised another worker whose employer is so wealthy that the cost of her health products and snacks for one year equal three years of domestic workers' wages (1200 RMB per year). She first asked why if the woman is so wealthy, she does not raise her wages every two months? Then Su commented that you cannot waste your words by saying that sort of thing, because who would be able to tolerate it. Instead she advised the other worker to "do all that is humanly possible" for her employer. In another account, Su also emphasized this:

You need to correctly lay out [think about] your position. You can't always be thinking about how others aren't good to you, now that we are earning this money. The foremost thing is that we are subordinated (we obey). The second thing that we attain is that we are able to emotionally move others, we can touch others. You can make other people feel like pulling this money out for you, you can make people feel joyful and happy. As long as you treat people sincerely. When I stay in your home, I also won't profit at your expense, we won't let personal considerations interfere with our duty.

Su continued to recount how one grandma would buy her clothes and give her *hong bao* (red gift envelope with money). "If you stay in someone's home and you have that sort of expectations, that's wrong (*cuo le*). People aren't alike." Su believes that one of domestic workers' few and most effective tools is to make their employers happy through their professional work, and hence make things a bit easier for themselves. The way she described their work is not merely as professionals, but takes on additional meaning. She thinks that a good performance of submissive yet professional work can have a positive psychological impact on employers. In her case, Su does not just adapt a subordinate service role because it has become normalized for her, but she deliberately chooses to do so as the best method for ensuring a good working and living relationship. This approach however has high personal costs for the worker who wants to maintain a professional front or a "smiling face," regardless of how she is treated or what is going on in her personal life. Su understands the importance of emotion in moral judgment. Knowing that employers have the power to treat her well or badly, she withholds her emotions when she is not treated as she would wish, and no longer morally critiques her employers for withholding food. She thinks one should be a good domestic worker and

act sincerely towards one's employers, but when one has bad employers, good behavior becomes a means to earn better treatment or other rewards.

These three accounts have helped to connect the profound impact of migrant domestic workers' everyday experiences of learning morality, which includes shifting or cultivating their moral lens, their socio-political consciousness, and how they behave towards others. Tang Ming has developed a new socio-political consciousness along with her conversion, and acts upon it to help less fortunate people. Lin critiques her neighbor's gossip which discriminates against migrants, but fails to act upon it. And Su no longer criticizes what she once found morally negligent, which shows that moral learning is not necessarily unidirectional in the sense of only becoming increasingly attuned to injustice and immorality. However Su does realize the importance of acting morally good in order to be treated better by her employers. These accounts also demonstrate how individualized moral learning is, and how changing moral awareness and socio-political consciousness may lead to either compliant behavior or action.

IMMORALITY

By comparing workers' accounts, we can see how they present and critique how others have treated them immorally, and explore the reasons why they either acquiesced or resisted. I will first examine situations in which the women have acquiesced in response to poor treatment. This comparison will elicit ideas about moral motives for women who respond so differently to subordination, despite their similar situation.

When examining action or inaction, resistance or acquiescence, there are multiple important considerations that influence an individual's behavior. The first involves how the individual construes her immoral treatment, which encompasses her attitude and emotions towards the person who has behaved immorally, and how it has made her feel. Moral dissonance prompts inquiry into the reasons for the immoral treatment. Without exception, all nine of the workers cited in this section recognized that their treatment was wrong, unfair, and immoral. The second consideration relates to whether an individual thinks she has the freedom to respond to moral concerns and to act in her own interests. The final point relates to the major concerns that motivate an individual's responses, whether they are moral and based on principle, or pragmatic.

Acquiescence

In this section, I present five accounts in which the individuals chose to remain in their given situations, despite having been exploited, commodified, and treated poorly. The first account is from a worker who was a victim of labor trafficking. Zhao An was tricked by a fellow villager into signing up for a job, which was meant to trap women in Beijing with very low pay. She and the other women had already spent money on tickets going to Beijing, so needed to earn money as soon as they arrived. They had been promised 1200 RMB a month, but were only paid 700 RMB. The living conditions were bad, with fifteen people crammed into one damp and stuffy underground room. Upset, Zhao An called her acquaintance a cheater. She realized she had been tricked by the boss who knew that most women would have little choice but to accept poor living and work conditions, and the low pay. Despite her realization, Zhao An responded pragmatically to the immoral treatment. She was free to leave, but could not bear to after spending so much money on her trip. She did not think she could leave without earning some money, nor could she improve her work situation (she did not think she could advocate for herself), so decided to stay for two months to earn enough for her travel expenses and a bit extra.

The next account is from a worker who had a similar response to immoral treatment. Qing Yi from Gansu province is a 32-year-old mother of a one year-old girl who has lived in Beijing for several years. For over two years, she has worked for several families as a live-in worker and also does some hourly work. When she was younger, Qing Yi refused to bow to her mother's pressure to marry a cousin, and instead married late but of her own choice. She is currently working for her seventh employer, a 79-year-old lady who is parsimonious and very controlling about the cost of things, especially water. Qing Yi's voice reflects her dislike of her employer when she narrates for her, mimicking her high-pitched commands and complaints. Her descriptions show that she feels aggrieved about her employer's behavior.

If I want to wash two pieces of clothes, she's really unhappy about it. But now it's really hard to find work, so I'm just making do. After using minimal water to wash dishes I have to take it out [and reuse it] to rinse the toilet. And she won't let me wash my clothes. Her husband, he's been hospitalized, right, so I have to (she makes me) wash the clothes at the hospital and then bring them back.

When I asked whether Qing Yi eats well, she says she does not get enough to eat, and her stomach hurts. She is just fed vegetables, steamed buns or rice gruel. Worried about her nutritional needs, Qing Yi's husband bought her some fruit, which caused her employer to inquire how she had enough money to buy fruit. She was told that from now on she can buy her own.

The worker recognizes she is being treated poorly and immorally, but tries to contextualize her elderly employer's actions. Even though there is an explanation, she still construes her poor treatment as immoral. She explains that the elderly woman was part of the "Resist America, Support Korea" efforts during the Korean War of 1950. Life was miserable then, so she had to be frugal about everything. Everything now seems expensive to her, and she is particularly parsimonious when it comes to spending money on Qing Yi, to the extent that she tries to use Qing Yi to save money. When Qing Yi takes time off, her employer wants her to bring all the laundry with her to wash. Last time this happened, Qing Yi had to explain the obvious to the elderly woman; that she does not have a home or anywhere to do the laundry for free. Her employer persevered and asked whether Qing Yi's husband could get the laundry washed for her. She responded that it's not free for him either, water costs money for everyone. The employer calls Qing Yi a child and accuses her of washing her own clothes rather than the employer's, and of not respecting her. Qing Yi replies that she respects people but they have to respect her too. She tells me that if her employers are good to her, she will work herself to the bone for them. But if they are not good to her, she implies there are limits. She was particularly unhappy about not being allowed to shower. Qing Yi commented to me, "How is it alright that you (the employer) do not let people wash? But there's no use in saying this. I gave the teacher (agency staff) a call. She said it's ok to leave, but there are no jobs now. Next month it will be easy to find work." She had initially told the agency staff that everything is great and both she and the family are satisfied, so as to not cause trouble.

Although Qing Yi plans to stay for now, she considers her situation unacceptable. She is very dissatisfied with the elderly lady who she says does not respect her, and looks down on her. Qing Yi generally acts with patience and civility towards the lady because she is elderly and employs her, and because she understands how her employer's past suffering affects her present actions. However, money does not buy her respect or loyalty, and she realizes that her employer's treatment of her is not just based on her frugality. Her comments show that she feels dehumanized; it is apparent that

saving money is more important to the employer than treating Qing Yi humanely. Although she is unhappy with her work, she and many other domestic workers feel that in the present labor market they must be pragmatic and not show the extent of their dissatisfaction to either their employers or employment agency staff. Like Qing Yi and Zhao An, many workers privilege their goal of earning money over their desire to respond to discrimination, or poor or unjust treatment. They also do not feel that they have the power or ability to change their situation, so there is “no use in saying” anything.

Tang Ming also recognizes the importance of past history on one’s present behavior and socio-political consciousness. She offers a valuable example of contextual morality from her own family history, commenting on the common values and practices regarding women of her parents’ and their parents’ generation. Tang Ming’s mother-in-law and mother were both treated as chattel. Tang Ming knew that at the time in 1945 or 1950 there was serious discrimination against women (*zhongnan qingnü*), but acknowledged that all of China was like this and everyone was struggling to survive. She spoke over a period of hours, unrolling her family history, which has affected her too.

Tang Ming pities her 70-year-old mother-in-law because she is completely illiterate, and is incredulous that she never even learned to recognize Chinese characters. Her mother-in-law was the only girl in a family of seven children. At that time, her parents were worried because they could not feed their six sons sufficiently, so they exchanged their only daughter for a cart of grain.

Now you can’t imagine this, becoming a daughter-in-law for a cart of grain. At that time, there wasn’t a question of whether girls agreed or not, the parents would choose and that’s it...My mother-in-law was very beautiful with white skin, very good-looking and she was her family’s only daughter, but her brothers weren’t able to get enough to eat, so there was no other way, she was given to this other family. This was about the same [situation] as my mother...That’s how her family exchanged her. A lot of people’s families were like that...

The following account is about Tang Ming’s own mother:

My father was a landlord and his family had some grain. My maternal grandmother and her daughters lived in other people’s homes and there was no grain, so she [grandmother] gave her eldest daughter to a well-off household chosen by her brother. He matched them and said that this family is wealthy

and very good, and you can help support your family [by bringing in] some money. So that's how my mother married him. At that time my maternal grandmother was very open-minded and she let the two of them meet and both of them thought it was fine. They also both had some education...my mother could recognize words, read and write. At that time there were no mobile phones or phones, so you would communicate by letter, and if you could write letters, you were an educated person. Long after, my maternal grandmother would still laugh. She said that when her daughter married into their family, that originally they [the husband's family] had said they'd give three sacks of wheat in exchange...and ultimately they gave one sack less. At that time, that's what betrothal gifts were like....

Tang Ming's feelings about discrimination against women emerge even more distinctly in her own story. When she was young, her family was very poor, so if they had apples, they would not just casually eat them. If her maternal grandmother had two apples she might give Tang Ming half to share with her younger sister, and her younger brother would get a whole one. If her older brother was there as well, each brother would get one apple, and the daughters would not get any, because "it would be useless to give them to girls. They would say that the boys should eat, eventually they will be in control of the family. If girls eat, they will eventually be married out [to another family]."

Tang Ming's stories illustrate the continuity of deeply damaging social norms which were practiced by those closest to the women, and which can have unforeseen and sometimes longstanding impacts on the individuals involved, such as for Tang Ming's mother and mother-in-law. Now in more permissive times, Tang Ming and her husband have divorced, at his insistence, and she left Xinjiang to raise her children on her own. However, she is still concerned about the stigma of divorce for women, so only her family (and I) know about it. Her narration of these stories is a moral critique of the discriminatory norms that labeled herself and her female relatives as worth far less than men. In noting that both her mother and mother-in-law were exchanged for grain, she highlights their commodification. Not only were unmarried women used as a medium of exchange, but they also tended to obey. Families could expect their daughters to submit to decisions about their future, and to take the opportunity to "provide" for their families, even at their own expense. This is still a key reason why workers acquiesce in difficult work situations. Many women consider their obligations to provide for their families as more important than what they must put up with in their present situation.

Stories like Tang Ming's that morally construe others are valuable, because they are natural vehicles for conveying the narrator's feelings and values. These women assert

their moral authority in using their stories to comment on social ills like discrimination against women, and other forms of unjust or immoral treatment. People naturally focus on others' stories of immorality and the messages that they carry. This may be because people try to lead normal lives generally adhering to their own moral standards, and it is troubling when others slip. While everyone wants some control over their lives and to be able to freely pursue happiness, it is troubling to hear about people who act immorally, particularly when the victim is someone who is close to them, or someone like them. Conceivably it could happen to them too. In this way, these stories also function as warnings. When domestic workers hear about what happens to their colleagues, they may also wonder whether they will have a similar experience. They will then be more likely to identify such a situation as immoral, after it has been framed as such by their peers.

The next account is a contemporary version of Tang Ming's account, to show how a mere few decades ago, women could still be "sold" as a commodity in exchange for food. Feng Zhilian had reluctantly migrated to Beijing because of her family's financial difficulties. She felt really unhappy about migrating, as though she had abandoned her children and parents to care for other people's parents. As a child she often went to live with her grandfather, because her parents did not get along and her mother wanted a divorce. When she turned 13 her grandfather died, and her mother arranged her marriage. She did not understand what that meant, because she was too young and her mother would not explain it to her. Her mother made her work every day even when she was sick, and if she didn't cook or cook well, she would hit her daughter. It was not clear how much time had passed since she turned 13, but Feng Zhilian was clearly still very young when she married. A month after the New Year, her husband came to get her. She cried and refused to leave, but her mother hit her. She ran away the first night and then returned with her sister, staying for just one night. When she ran away again her mother was worried that she would not be faithful and let her stay. The second year, her family's situation changed for the worse, consequently affecting her.

The second year my family didn't have grain to eat; that means we didn't have any food to eat. My husband's father said, "My family has grain, I'll give you 2000 jin, now those 2000 jin of grain (2204 pounds/1000 kg)... again I could not go to Beijing to work, and again I had nowhere to go, what to do, those 2000 jin of grain coaxed me, so I couldn't do anything except [to go] live in their household. Their family reminded me of the debt, how much grain my mother and her family ate, how much it cost over there. They reminded me that

when I was engaged, my family took 100 RMB, and took his (the husband's) 240 RMB when I got married, at the end they gave my husband 40 back, so just took 200 RMB total. This is how you get married. At that time, when I went to my husband's...I said how did this happen to me. When I saw him, I felt unhappy and my heart was bitter.

Feng Zhilian's account indicates that both her mother and in-laws did not see her as an autonomous individual and "denied her subjectivity," treating her like an item of exchange to pay off her family's debt and obligations. Like Tang Ming's mother and mother-in-law, it was apparent how little she was valued and how much greater power currency (and food) held in society at that time. She was exchanged from one family to another, a dehumanizing act that was partly concealed by the diffusion of responsibility. Instead of accepting that she was married against her will, her in-laws cited the role of her own family in the decision. Feng Zhilian ultimately did not think she could act in her own interest, and perhaps partly because there was little emphasis on her value as a person outside the context of family, she performed a moral act for her family by finally acquiescing.

The next account involves immorality within husband-wife relations. During our interviews, Su talked at length about her past history with her husband. Her accounts reveal how immoral behavior often has a history, during which both acquiescence and resistance are possible. Su received a warning about her husband when he deceived her early on, a time during which she said he was still naïve. Then over a period of a few years, he changed and his emotions turned from love to hate.

One of the first times her husband tricked her was when they were seeing each other, but were not yet married. He asked her to come over to help him set up a mosquito net, which she was known to be skilled at. Then after she arrived, he seduced her. He turned out to be engaged to a woman who had mental problems, but he wanted to be with Su. Su fell in love with him, despite the fact that neither of her parents approved. However, intending to marry her, he patiently spent a few years engaged in bride service (when men do work for their bride's kinsmen before marriage). He worked for Su's mother and her family building a house, and was at everyone's beck and call. Then her mother decided she wanted a wall, and he built it. Su's mother had two motives: she wanted to create obstacles to the marriage, but also benefitted greatly from his labor. Finally he finished and went to Beijing to earn money, but contracted tuberculosis, and had to return home for two years to recover. Su said their relations were so good at one point,

that sometimes they even spent the entire day on the phone just talking. However, unbeknownst to her, during his illness, he started to resent Su because she never sent him money or bought him medicine. She did not think of this, but as an unmarried woman, continued to send her wages home to her parents. Jealous and insecure, he came to Beijing to check on her employers, and pushed her to leave till she ended up having to sacrifice her favorite job. The abuse and neglect increased over time, particularly after they were married and she had her first child.

Su was aware that her husband's duplicity originated from his desire to control and punish her. She suspected that although he had agreed to a divorce in theory, the punishment that came afterwards would be even worse. Either she, her parents, or her children would be the victims. Before Su even got married, her parents were troubled by her choice. She said, "first of all they knew he was poor, and they also knew that his family was not just or righteous. Whoever's family [in the village] had real strength (power), [then his family] would play up to them. Whoever didn't have real power, then they would just trample on them. You foreigners might say that these people have no principles."

Su's husband's immoral behavior has influenced her entire life, including her experience of migration and domestic work. She has moved multiple times, lost jobs, and returned to the village for him. She knows and sometimes resents the fact that while she is out working, he is back in the village enjoying the fruits of her hard labor, such as the modern refrigerator, sleek red microwave, and TV in their home, and also has a negative influence on their children. Over the years she has tried to make their relationship work, but now she feels emotionally distant. She has tried leaving him multiple times, and if she had the freedom to leave him for good, she would, but the possible repercussions are dire for her parents who live nearby, and for her children whom she cannot support on her own. Therefore, Su must live with her moral dissonance and knowledge that her husband will continue to treat her immorally. Only the affective ties with her children and parents keep her in the marriage. She has fought hard to make a good life for her children, but recognizing the power that her husband has, in the end has chosen to sacrifice her personal happiness to stay with her husband and take care of her children.

With experiences ranging from being sold for marriage, deprived of adequate food, labor trafficked, and abused, all these women ultimately acquiesced. Some of the

women tried to resist their immoral treatment, but relinquished their ability to act in their own interests, because other factors were ultimately more important. The women made their decisions based on their obligations to others or the fear of what would happen to others if they didn't comply, their immediate and practical need for money or a place to live, and a prioritization on harmony and happy employers. Those who complied with arranged marriages or stayed within an abusive marriage, did so because they placed the interests of others over their own.

Qing Yi and Zhao An realized that their employers treated them inhumanely in order to save money. Although this awareness did not lead to self-advocacy, the workers importantly saw their decision as strategic and short-term. Qing Yi planned to leave as soon as she found another job, and Zhao An planned to leave after two months so she could save some money. They still felt that they gained enough by staying, despite the physical and psychological toll. I suggest that when an individual considers a work situation intolerable and sees insufficient benefit in staying, she will leave. We will explore this idea in the next section. In the cases in which women entered into arranged marriages or remained with abusive family members, the underlying logic is different. The women who were exchanged in marriage for food complied because they were chosen to obtain needed resources, or to "provide" for their families. Su stayed with her husband because she needed him as a wage-earner (while she is at home) or caretaker (while she was in Beijing), and was afraid that otherwise he would exact revenge on her family. The three women who entered into or stayed in marriages did not have true control over their decisions; their decisions were ultimately made by their parents or spouse. I suggest that the acquiescence of the women in arranged marriages was determined by the strength of their intimate ties to the decision-makers, underlined by their moral belief in filial piety or familial sacrifice.

Albert Bandura describes two aspects of moral agency, inhibitive and proactive:

The inhibitive form is manifested in the power to refrain from behaving inhumanely. The proactive form of morality is expressed in the power to behave humanely. In the latter case, individuals invest their sense of self-worth so strongly in humane convictions and social obligations that they act against what they regard as unjust or immoral even though their actions may incur heavy personal costs.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory," 33.

Bandura's definitions do not precisely fit these cases, but I will adopt the general concept. If proactive moral agency is when workers respond based on their moral values or social obligations, then the women who chose to submit to arranged marriages could be said to demonstrate a sort of proactive moral agency by saving their families from hunger. While these women ultimately do not look out for their own interests as autonomous human beings, they do critique their immoral experiences and are aware that they are sacrificing themselves. If it can be considered moral to acquiesce to immorality, then pursuing one's moral agency can result in disempowerment. This then creates a legitimizing moral basis for future self-sacrifice and acquiescence.

Resistance

When domestic workers resist immoral treatment, they are exercising proactive moral agency in their own interests. For the most part, in the following accounts the women resist either in defense of their moral integrity, or in order to pursue justice for themselves. The first three cases deal with dehumanizing treatment. The first two accounts are from Su and her younger sister, Tang Jia. I will explain how their responses to immoral behavior can diverge from their moral standpoint. These cases show how people act in response to more extreme examples of dehumanization.

Tang Jia feels that her sense of morality has been passed down from their parents, who promoted an open, honest way of relating to others.

They (parents) taught us that we want to be seen by others as friends. You don't want to have a guarded mentality towards others. When you speak, you want everyone to believe you. You shouldn't look upon someone as [though they are] a criminal. I've been influenced by my mother and father. My mother is an honest and trustworthy person, and now I'm becoming like my mother and father, it has been passed onto the next generation. I think I'm too trusting of others. Many people have said that to me, because I'm too honest and kind...But when I hear other people, like when I'm out working, and they are always saying how other people are bad, I think that that's an artificial relationship. For example, if you are in someone else's home and you are chatting but don't put forth effort and don't work, people will look down on you. But if you are good and have genuine and sincere intentions towards others, they will certainly eventually be good to you.

According to Tang Jia, their parents felt that if one has positive intent, it translates into trustworthy action which then wins trust or friendship. Tang Jia, like her sister, believes

that one should perform well at work and with sincerity, which will in turn earn the favor of their employers. However, for Tang Jia, these qualities are not just desirable because they can earn recognition and even friendship, but because they are innately good.

Tang Jia recounted a story in which her belief in having her sincerity repaid was proven wrong. When working for one family, Tang Jia felt as though she were constantly monitored. Whenever she left the building, her employer would stand in the doorway until she disappeared from sight and would monitor her comings and goings from the balcony as well. She would be given a limited amount of time to accomplish each errand, and then would be allowed back inside. Instead of giving Tang Jia a key, they would lock the door immediately after she left or re-entered. She ended up having to pay for small expenses, and then they docked her pay for each thing she inadvertently damaged. Although she did not own a mobile phone at the time, they ripped out her phone line. The final straw came after she was locked in for a whole day, and was unable to leave.

Despite Tang Jia's efforts and emphasis on acting kindly towards others and not treating people as though they were criminals, she called the police after being locked inside. Within the first week, the employer had crossed the line of what she considered tolerable. She came to her decision because she valued her freedom over other concerns like wages and room and board. Tang Jia recognized her moral logic would not work in this situation; her employer's immoral behavior was not going to improve.

One's moral standards do not necessarily dictate how one should act in response to immorality. Immoral behavior by definition contradicts ideas about how people should lead their lives, and therefore it is understandable when immorality does not elicit a "morally good" response. In the last section, Su's position on her entitlement to good food changed drastically. With her new perspective on being able to emotionally move her employers, she is no longer the victim, but is free to act to affect her employer's emotions and improve her situation. She next describes one of her earlier jobs in which, despite her desire to act sincerely towards her employers and move them, she chose to resist her client's immoral treatment in a very unusual and unexpected way.

Su took on a part-time job which involved doing laundry, and cooking and taking care of her employer's dog, or as she said "waiting on him." She found herself in a

demeaning situation, being expected to treat the dog better than she herself was treated by her client.

I would cook for the little dog, and after I was done, I ate instant noodles. I didn't want to eat their leftover rice. It was either leftover rice that they brought back from a restaurant or instant noodles. But the little dog got to eat spareribs. I thought of the spareribs that I had washed clean and I cooked five of them. Wouldn't it be alright if I ate one and gave the dog the rest? I need nutrition. I secretly took one, and the dog also leaned over the dining room table to eat his. The family was really unhygienic; they'd have him eat at the table. Then when I wanted to move, the dog started yapping, "bow-wow-wow." I couldn't move my chopsticks to eat until the dog ate what was left. I had to first feed the dog, then I could eat. I ate a tiny bit then the dog bit my heel. He threw himself towards my socks yapping like crazy.

There was also my client's mother who had dementia. When he yapped she came out. Instead of saying that I could take a break, she found work for me to do. I was angry at that time, and after the yapping I wasn't in a good frame of mind. I thought about the difference between people with and without money. You say that the little dog can eat spareribs, but every day you want me to eat leftover rice or instant noodles. I'm a person too. Although I'm earning money from you, I also give your family service. I felt keyed up, and thought about mistreating the little dog. I hit him, and he started crying out as though his life depended on it. Then afterwards when his master came back I had to explain it. I said, "Your little dog here wasn't careful today and I stepped on it a bit. He wouldn't stop yapping." She said, "If you stepped on our dog, then you'd better quickly apologize to him. You should bow to him [with your hands folded in front] and say you are sorry. Bow to him and apologize."

These humiliating experiences and the client's final demand set the dog's fate, for Su could not imagine continuing to work for this family if the dog was still there. Her account is replete with details of her inferiority within the household. Dogs normally eat on the floor, but this dog ate in the same place and at the same height she did, which suggested equality. Worse yet, it ate better food and before she did. Su saw herself as having to serve the dog, an image that was fixed after she had to bow and apologize to the dog. The employers likely saw the little dog as more of a "person" than Su. Su first disobeyed what she was expected to do when she took a sparerib, then when she hit the dog. She could not share her real feelings with her client, and presumably had to apologize to the dog without showing her anger and mortification. However, she then took gradually more extreme steps to get rid of it until she succeeded by mixing a cleaning product into its food. Although one could call her reactions immoral and unjustified, Su demonstrated what from her point of view could be considered proactive

moral agency, because it was in reaction to her loss of human dignity. She did not seem embarrassed about what she did, perhaps because she did not value animals as pets, but particularly because she felt justified in her actions. It is interesting that Su took the trouble to try to get rid of the dog over a period of time, although she could have easily left her job. She had another part-time job, so was not completely reliant on this one. It would have been practical to leave, but she chose the more difficult route because she wanted the extra income, and she refused to be humiliated any longer. She was motivated both by practicality (not wanting to serve the dog) and by principle.

Zhao An, who had been labor trafficked herself, also told stories about village girls who had been trafficked and tried to resist:

Back at home there was a young girl who said she was migrating out for work. But the outcome was that she was deceived then sold. She was trafficked. After she was sold, her family couldn't find her. Later on, she jumped from a building to get away and seriously injured herself, crawling away to go report her situation. There were two young girls, one who jumped from the building, and the other who was sold into prostitution. She refused to do it and they hit her, they would hit her and tell her to do it. Young girls are usually sold to dancehalls and are made to do bad things. These girls were 19 or 20; they weren't in school and came out to work.

Zhao An's account focuses on females being exploited for their commercial worth, either for their labor or their bodies. Trafficking is innately dehumanizing, as people are appreciated solely for their monetary and instrumental value. In discussing dehumanization, Haslam points out the importance for people to recognize others' identity, for without doing so, it becomes easier to emotionally distance oneself, "When people are divested of these agentic and communal aspects of humanness they are deindividuated, [and] lose the capacity to evoke compassion and moral emotions."¹⁶⁴ This may also be what Su recognized, that once dehumanized by serving the dog, her strategy to move the client emotionally would not work.

The girls who were abducted both resisted in order to regain their lives and their freedom. They were pressured into handing their lives over to others, like the women in arranged marriages, but unlike these women, they had no intimate ties or obligations to the traffickers. Except for the fear of further abuse or worse if they resisted or escaped and were recaptured, there was no advantage to staying.

¹⁶⁴ Haslam, "Dehumanization," 254.

The final three cases involve injustice and issues of fairness. In practice, justice for domestic workers is not usually negotiated by anyone with formal authority, unless the workers bring in the police. It is a big step to bring in the police, as it will certainly involve confrontation and conflict with the employer, and the officers may also choose to believe the employer. Agencies rarely intervene since advocating for the workers might cause them to lose profitable business, so they want the women to work things out for themselves. When workers cannot rely on state or legal mechanisms for justice, they must either accept, justify, or make up their losses, or advocate for themselves. Workers can also use other means to make up what they perceive as a loss, such as when Su hit her employer's dog after being treated inhumanely. However, Su later commented on her inability to attain justice, even outside the law. She married her husband partly because having been bullied when she was young, she felt her family would be protected by her husband and all his brothers. But her decision worked against her, and she and her parents are now vulnerable to her husband's family. "I don't think that China has justice. I've continuously fought, but it's a pity that heaven never gave me an opportunity to fight to win." Another apt quote about justice comes from a domestic worker's friend who told her that she doesn't believe in the police anymore, she doesn't believe in anyone, she can only believe in herself. She said that she knows that the police only work for people who have money. Both she and Su are aware that justice is not often on their side; the poor and marginalized are usually left suffering in silence.

Next, I will examine cases of injustice where workers have openly advocated for themselves and explore how their moral reasoning relates to their actions. These women actively countered injustice, and pressed the perpetrators to do the right thing or to be accountable for their actions. The first worker went after her unpaid wages, the second worker pursued justice based on principle, and the last one sought to defend her dignity.

One stressed hourly worker, Cai, is under a great deal of pressure to work every day to support her two children in college and to pay back their loans. I met her occasionally in the street, then months after participating in my focus group and an individual interview, she called to ask if I would go with her to see a client.¹⁶⁵ The client had refused to pay her 400 RMB for her 20 days of part-time work. We were stopped at the

¹⁶⁵ It is possible that my presence gave Cai the courage to confront her employer and to call the police, but there had been previous incidents in which clients refused to pay her or short-changed her, and she consistently advocated for herself through negotiation.

security desk of an expensive looking apartment building and both the client (over speakerphone) and the guards at the front desk refused to let us go up to her apartment. Cai was agitated, she spoke urgently in a loud and rapid voice. She had to reassure her employer many times that we were not there to make trouble, but said she wanted to settle her wages. While waiting, Cai started sounding desperate, and then told the guards that if the client did not pay her, she could sue her. To my surprise, she ended up calling the police. She argued her case with the stern and burly policeman, speaking loudly over him at times. The policeman went upstairs to talk to the client, and after I left, Cai eventually managed to get some of her wages back, although not the full amount. She was uneasy after the ordeal though because she had to report to the police station, and she was worried that they would keep a record on her which would hurt her future work opportunities.

Cai was one of the few who persisted when she was treated unjustly, and pursued redress to the best of her ability, even to the point of calling the police. She was one of a handful of workers that I had interviewed or heard of second-hand, who was willing to call the police. Part of this was her need for the money that she had earned. The atmosphere in the front hall of the client's building was tense, and I felt that everyone there looked down on her for pursuing her wages and causing trouble. Even though it was probably apparent to both the policeman and the front desk guards that the employer had somehow cheated Cai, there was also a sense that Cai should not stir up trouble. For Cai there were both costs and benefits to resisting injustice. It took time, psychological courage and willingness to engage with both her client and the police, but she was able to get most of her promised wages, and importantly to take an active role against being exploited.

The second worker, Xiang is the other worker who advocates most actively for herself. She connects it to her willingness to speak up against what is wrong and immoral.

I remember that since I was young I haven't been afraid of things. After I was married, my husband's family's neighbor scolded me. He said to my husband, you would [not only] let her go look for the central leadership, Jiang Zemin, but she would dare to go. He said that I would dare to go, that I would dare to speak. Whatever I want, if I see something unfair, I will dare to say something. That's my temperament. But the person I am, I don't have control over that, it's my disposition.

Xiang is also a very entrepreneurial woman. She not only had the idea of printing her own domestic worker business cards, but carries on a side business of cooking *jianbing*, a traditional Chinese crepe snack wrapped around a fried egg and a crispy fried dough sheet. She gets up around 4am to prepare the ingredients and goes out and sells *jianbing* before her domestic work jobs. Xiang told me of a conflict over the crepes. The owner of a restaurant near where she was standing tried to chase her away, convinced she may be affecting their business. Xiang told me,

I think that what she (the restaurant owner) did was wrong. “Is the area in front of your doorway also yours? It’s not possible that the area on either side of your doorway is also yours.” I argued with her for almost a week, and I kept returning to that place. After I arrived some people would follow me as I went over there, because they wanted to eat *jianbing*. Then I opened [for business]. After I closed, the person who was fighting with me came over. She carried a bag of fruit, and gave me a formal apology. I felt that she had been wrong. But she had been thinking things over and she said to me “for quite a few days now and this evening, I’ve been thinking...I think that what I did wasn’t right.” So, this elder sister (polite title) gave me a formal apology. I said to her again, “I think that what you did was wrong. You don’t want to be like other people in society and dominate the market. Isn’t that right? This place isn’t totally yours. Right in front of your door is yours, but the area on the side of the road isn’t.” I said these things to her. She apologized to me and gave me the bag of fruit. She said “this is a token of my regard. I made a mistake, so I’m apologizing to you. You are an older woman, so I bought you some fruit.”

Xiang repeatedly stated that what the restaurant owner did was wrong. Xiang’s case is particularly interesting because we have insight into the moral reflection of the wrongdoer, who came around to what Xiang saw as her just and moral point of view. These two parties may have had different socio-economic statuses and contrary interests, but came to respect the same principles. Xiang also emphasized several times that the woman made a formal apology to her, and gave her the gift. The formality of her apology, and the fact that the woman confessed that she had been troubled over what she had done, further legitimizes Xiang’s stance and the worth of pursuing justice. Unfortunately, Xiang’s cart was eventually seized by the city inspectors. She could not afford to buy another one, and as a result, lost a great deal of her needed daily income. Xiang’s willingness to deal with antagonistic people to stake her rightful claim to make a living, and her strategy of reasoning with them has proven to be successful at least twice (there are likely many more instances that I do not know of). She never backed down when confronted, so each time she proved to herself that she could withstand hostility. Each success builds her confidence and conviction that she can advocate for

herself. Her assuredness and moral certainty likely makes others think twice about taking advantage of her or challenging her, and whether they were right to do so in the first place.

The third domestic worker, one of Cai's friends, was falsely accused by her employer of stealing one gold earring. Cai described what had happened:

The employer asked her where her earring went. The maid said that she didn't know and that she clearly saw the employer put it down, and how come she didn't see it? But in fact she (the employer) knew, she just wanted to make the maid compensate her for the earring. The maid said "Last night I didn't go home, so you can search my bag and clothes. You can spread everything out and inspect it." Then the maid spread everything out and it wasn't there. She called her husband and the manager of her agency was also called. "I don't have your earring that you keep on talking about. What are you going to do now, you've harmed my reputation and you must pay." Her husband brought some friends, and then she got into an intense argument with the manager. She wanted her husband to bring even more friends, and then after the police came, she (the employer) was a bit scared. She had thought that it would be easy to bully a maid. Then she said that she found the earring. The maid said "You knew very well where it was. How could you say that I took it?"

We do not know if the maid ever got compensated or received an apology, but she never returned to that employer's home again. Immoral or unjust treatment frequently entails loss of dignity, which workers must silently tolerate. Cai's friend turned the tables on her employer. She found strength in her own righteousness, as well as in numbers. She scared both the manager of her agency who was likely worrying about losing clients, and her employer. Only after taking these drastic steps, was the employer made to feel shame for trying to exploit her.

The responses of individuals like the last three domestic workers are closely and directly related to their experiences of suffering injustice. To decide to counter injustice, workers must first believe that there is a worthwhile cause or outcome. A small minority of workers both have the strong motivation to counter what is wrong or immoral, and the ability to act upon it. They believe that potential gains are worth the frustration, anxiety and vulnerability experienced when confronting the guilty party. As far as we know, two out of the three domestic workers had been willing to advocate for themselves in the past, which means that they had already faced the uncertainty and social discomfort involved in standing up to those who subordinate them. As long as it

also builds confidence rather than fear of failure, the courage to engage in resistance is like an agentic “muscle” that becomes stronger once exercised.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have shown how domestic workers’ moral process, moral learning, and moral perspectives are key influences on their responses to subordination. First of all, moral dissonance in particular, can enable workers to recognize that their treatment is wrong or unjust, and to critique it. However, this recognition and critique alone do not lead to self-advocacy. Workers will acquiesce not only because they need their wages to provide for their families, or feel too powerless to resist, but also because many of them are conscientious about striving to be moral. Being moral or ethical in ways that are condoned by dominant social norms, however, is not necessarily the best response to being commoditized, discriminated against, exploited or dehumanized. In fact most of the workers who challenged these situations, acted in ways that could be seen as causing trouble. Perhaps it is at this juncture that many workers face a dilemma. They have spent much of their lives trying to be good at school, work, and in their relational roles. In order to oppose immorality, their moral critiques should be accompanied by a sense of entitlement to justice and individual autonomy, as well as the possibility of being able to effect change.

Why do workers not feel more entitled to act immorally when they have been treated badly? In addition to Su’s account, I have heard a few stories about workers who steal change or clothes from their employers, so there are indeed some workers who act immorally. I suggest that the majority of domestic workers generally maintain their moral conduct for two reasons: because of the structures of accountability that are in place, and because as a social group they place importance on acting morally. Domestic workers are expected to act morally; they are supposed to treat their employing family with respect and display tender care for their charges, as well as respect the family’s possessions and never steal or take anything, sometimes not even extra food. If they act immorally, or in a way that their employers construe as immoral or inappropriate, workers can be held accountable for their actions, either by having their wages docked or through the threat of a besmirched reputation. Their individual moralities will also play a large role in their behavior, so their responses will also depend on their personal views on immorality and justice.

Domestic workers' understandings about morality and how they should act are an essential part of their identities. This ties in with Bandura's discussion of internal moral standards and self-sanctions that work to support moral action or to permit immoral action. He points out that moral standards and self-sanctions are not always actively employed; there are many ways that they can be disengaged, as during dehumanization.¹⁶⁶ When workers' standards and self-sanctions are engaged, their moral actions reflect both inhibitive and proactive moral agency. There are many examples that reflect inhibitive moral agency, such as when they resist coveting and stealing what is not theirs, and when they do not respond in like kind to unjust or discriminatory treatment. Workers are often caretakers, and so they are inclined to see the human side of their employers. When they appreciate their employers as people they must care for, their moral self-sanctions warn them against immoral action. If their employers view workers instrumentally, their self-sanctions may not engage, allowing them to act in an inhumane way toward the workers.

The women who agreed to arranged marriages prioritized their families, likely valued their family's approval for being a good daughter, and believed that complying was the morally correct thing to do. They externalized their locus of control and believed that others had the power to make their decisions for them. In these two scenarios—being a good worker and being a good daughter—social and moral motivation become more important than the immoral request or action. Obligations to others and practical needs play a greater role in some workers' decisions. When they choose to stay just for wages, food and board despite condemning their treatment, they may also do so as responsible mothers.

The women who resisted, protected themselves from injustice and recognized that the decision was theirs to take. Su was the only one who resisted secretly rather than openly, which is in line with how she has dealt with past workplace problems. Unlike the women who acquiesced, these workers were not predominantly motivated by how they were seen by others, or by how well they fulfilled their function as a mother, daughter or worker. Rather, they acted to right a wrong committed against them as individuals. Their moral dissonance is rapidly recognized and emerges as a critique of their social worlds and of what they see as immoral.

¹⁶⁶ Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory," 32-33.

This chapter has focused on morality because it is fundamental to how workers assess, critique and respond to subordination, and it is important to make this aspect of domestic workers' lives explicit. Moral critique is not just derived from moral norms and ideas of right and wrong. It emerges from where the workers are situated and reflects their socio-political realities. In a money-hungry society, these Chinese workers are pursuing a small piece of the wealth, and the opportunities, status, and security it can buy, but in doing so are pressured to restrict their own moral agency. In drawing upon the women's accounts, I have underlined various ways in which we can understand how domestic workers conceive of their evolving moral understandings and moral dilemmas, and what guides their complex responses to immorality and injustice as they persist in leading their everyday moral lives.

CHAPTER 6

WORKERS' ACTIONS FROM SILENCE TO VOICE

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation has so far addressed migrant domestic workers' actions in response to subordination as they are linked to morality, ethics, power, socio-political consciousness, gender, identity and domestic work. While the last chapter examined workers' acquiescence or resistance, this chapter will likewise analyze cases studies demonstrating workers' silence or voice. However, the previous chapter adopted a predominantly moral lens to assess workers' actions, by considering workers' moral perspectives, perspectives on immorality, moral reasoning, and moral motivation to act. This chapter will complete my analytical approach by uniting a number of important influences on workers' actions, which further illuminate the reasons why particular individuals within a homogenous group act in different ways. In order to draw conclusions about why some workers comply with subordination and others resist, one must also be able to find a pattern of actions for each worker, and to grasp the logic behind the pattern. If one worker complies in one instance with subordination, but resists at another point, there is no obvious pattern of responses. Viewed in isolation, workers' actions do not necessarily appear to be consistent; their actions can shift from advocating for themselves to accommodating others based on the situation and its context. Additionally, workers' perceptions about their ability to resolve their issues or speak up for themselves, do not necessarily progress linearly either towards increased confidence or feeling disempowered. A worker may consistently remain silent when subordinated in the workplace, but if we limit our analysis to the workplace, we do not know the cumulative effects of subordination prior to migrating for domestic work, and how she has responded to it.

In this chapter, I employ a macro perspective, or a broader view of the influences on workers' silence and voice, or acquiescence and resistance. Disparate actions become intelligible when given a sufficiently broad context. I will consider their experiences of subordination and responses in their private lives separately and in comparison to their subordination and responses within the workplace. Although these two contexts involve different power relations and dynamics, the women's experiences outside the workplace

may be formative in how they approach workplace subordination, and vice-versa. Actions that involve consistent attitudes, motivations or tactics can reflect women's perspectives about power and social relations, their own identities, and their perceived ability to advocate for themselves. Whereas the last chapter explored resistance and acquiescence through a moral lens, this chapter will explore these actions by uniting several factors of analysis, many of which have been partially addressed earlier in the dissertation. To examine workers' actions over time, and in their private lives versus workplace, I consider: how workers view themselves and their own power and capacity to resist, how they learn and operate from their particular space and environment, their values and motivations, what they have learnt from past experiences, their socio-political consciousness, and how they think they should and are able to deal with poor treatment.

I next review literature on domestic workers' agency and resistance. Then, employing five longer case studies allows me to draw upon and compare the women's past and present, and personal life and work experiences. I have selected two accounts from women who consistently chose silence and adaptation as a tactic to cope with subordination, two accounts from women who advocated for themselves openly, and finally an extended case study of a woman who alternately chose silence, submission and resistance. Some of the above-mentioned factors will be examined when considering the following question: how do past experiences of subordination affect how workers see their capacity to push for change, and inform their tactics for coping with or countering subordination? This question is particularly interesting when it can be applied to subordination prior to domestic work which then affects how workers respond in the workplace. It can inform the reasons why a worker will advocate for herself in one context and not another, which we will explore in the first two case studies. Finally, I look to the future for Chinese migrant domestic workers, and discuss the possibility of moving closer to critical consciousness.

The Spectrum of Action

At one end of the spectrum of responses to subordination is silence, which, as a response to mistreatment, does not necessarily correlate with acceptance or agreement. Women can choose silence for many reasons. In particular, many of my interviewees do not consider speaking out to be an option. As I previously discussed, they hesitate to

upset others, to risk their wages or reputation with the intermediary agencies, or may simply feel that they have no power to change their situation beyond leaving and finding another job. Moving along the spectrum, workers may resist in hidden ways or even openly resist. As previous chapters have engaged extensively with domestic workers' silence and compliance, in this section on the spectrum of action, I will primarily address what resistance means for domestic workers.

The literature on Chinese female domestic workers' actions generally concurs that their everyday resistance tends to be individual rather than collective, limited in impact and scope, isolated, contextual and often disguised. Their very limited power and low status as domestic workers support coping strategies and actions such as submitting, cultivating emotional ties, or striving to be model workers. Variations of resistance in the workplace include: agreeing with their employer's instructions but then still doing things as they wish, gossiping behind their employer's back, quitting, stealing, polite refusal, reasoning and negotiating with their employer, and contacting the police or Labor Bureau.¹⁶⁷ When the literature addresses domestic workers' acquiescence and resistance, it tends to focus on their vulnerability, their experiences of subordination and consequent actions; their expectations about domestic work, discourses about work and self-development; and the role of the state, agencies and employers.

Wanning Sun examines workers' resistance, ranging from negotiation to violence, within the context of dominant discourses of risk and control.¹⁶⁸ She also explores workers' efforts to learn and find meaning through restricted cultural consumption and exploration, despite being treated as illegitimate consumers because of their socio-economic status, low *suzhi* and lack of spending money.¹⁶⁹ Xinying Hu investigates the nature of their "precarious working and living conditions" and the ways workers resist both unobtrusively or directly by arguing, attempting to draw upon the law, or quitting. When exposed to various types of abuse, workers also weigh the possible repercussions of quitting, and take into consideration the fact that opportunities within their dead-end profession are limited and often unfulfilling.¹⁷⁰ Arianne Gaetano frames domestic workers' agency in terms of social and material gain from striving to be model workers and learning how to skillfully navigate worker-employer relations.¹⁷¹ She also refers to

¹⁶⁷ Gaetano, "Off the Farm," 1-399; Hu, *China's New Underclass*; Sun, *Maid in China*.

¹⁶⁸ ———, *Maid in China*: 126-44.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 113-21.

¹⁷⁰ Hu, *China's New Underclass*: 92-114.

¹⁷¹ Gaetano, "Off the Farm," 225-33.

the utility of building emotional ties, which I have found to be a significant strategy for workers. Hairong Yan discusses how subaltern agency is inhibited by discourses of development, the rural, and worker self-discipline. She tells of one migrant worker's dream of a "new self" that was overshadowed by the "specter of class." Despite constant efforts to please her employer, she finally realized that she had misread their relationship, and that her employer just saw her as an expendable, lowly worker. After leaving, she regretted remaining silent, and came to identify herself with the oppressed *dagongmei*.¹⁷² Nicole Constable's book on Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong underlines the importance of examining both accommodation and resistance of workers who "actively resist and willingly participate in their own 'oppression'."¹⁷³ A small minority of Filipina workers speak up for themselves, a growing number participate in protests and rallies, and others participate in "subtle forms of resistance" like illegally selling goods in public spaces or embarrassing employers into providing better food.¹⁷⁴ Constable concludes that workers exercise forms of self-discipline and deference, partly because they are dominated, and partly because there are some real benefits to improving their work and worker-employer relationships.¹⁷⁵

James Scott suggests that the actions of the subordinated do not necessarily have any connection to how they feel about their treatment or how they are expected to act, but that they feel "public transcripts" or performances of silence, deference and compliance to be necessary.¹⁷⁶ He describes resistance as actions that should not just be defined by structures of domination, but include day-to-day acts such as gaining small advantages in order to protect one's interests, as well as direct action against domination.¹⁷⁷ Scott focuses on class resistance and acts based on the intention to "mitigate or deny claims (for example, rents, taxes, prestige) made on that class by superordinate classes (for example, landlords, large farmers, the state) or to advance its own claims (for example, work, land, charity, respect) vis-à-vis those superordinate classes."¹⁷⁸ He discusses the problem of defining resistance. For example, can one claim that certain acts like theft should be considered resistance, but without an account of the thief's motivation, some

¹⁷² Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*: 6, 209-10.

¹⁷³ Constable, *Maid to Order in Hong Kong*: 14.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 151-80.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁷⁶ Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*: 2-3.

¹⁷⁷ ———, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 299-301.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 290.

could argue that stealing is just for personal gain. He concludes that a pattern of acts, even if isolated, unprincipled and politically ineffective, is lower-class resistance.¹⁷⁹

I agree that acts do not need to be principled or intended to be transformative to count as resistance as long as they are undertaken with the awareness of inequality and of one's own subordination. This socio-political consciousness can involve workers coming to recognize the "specter of class" and the commodification of care and "personhood."¹⁸⁰ Women's observations about the unequal and sometimes exploitative relationships between workers and employers, the rich and poor, rural migrants and urban dwellers, conjoin to reinforce a dualistic and sometimes oppositional conception of themselves versus the dominant whom they encounter on an everyday basis. Their consciousness, bolstered by personal experiences of being treated poorly, hence set the scene for resistance.

I define resistance as action that diverges from the norms and expectations for compliance of those who exercise power over them, and that is motivated by an individual or a group's dissent or unhappiness with the conditions, form or impact of said power. Resistance is not simply a response to domination, but is based on the resisters' ideas about justice and rights, and how they think they should be treated. Resistance has a fundamentally political nature, whether or not the person intends it to be political and transformative, and whether it is a hidden, solitary action to gain what one thinks one deserves or needs from those in power, or a series of open challenges to gain rightful treatment or wages. It is political in that those who resist, either disagree with or defy the dominant norms underpinning subordination, and can go as far as opposing or upsetting existing power relations.

Resistance more akin to James Scott's "weapons of the weak"¹⁸¹ includes actions that indirectly critique the misuse of power and authority, such as through gossip or "misunderstanding" commands. Two accounts of domestic workers' stealing reference their motivations, suggesting that even stealing can be considered a form of hidden resistance. The workers stole based on feelings of resentment and perceptions of injustice. Tang Ming told me about her colleague who was not treated badly, but stole clothes because she felt it was unfair that the client was so wealthy as to have rooms just

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 291-96.

¹⁸⁰ Mary K. Zimmerman, Jacquelyn S. Litt, and Christine E. Bose, *Global Dimensions of Gender and Carework* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Social Sciences, 2006), 22, 233; Yan, *New Masters, New Servants*: 210.

¹⁸¹ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*.

for her clothes and shoes (in contrast to the worker's poverty). The second account concerns Su, who as I previously mentioned, took food that she felt she deserved multiple times, although her employer would not share with her, presumably because of her perceived low status. The most common acts of semi-open resistance are when domestic workers quit their jobs because they are unwilling to tolerate some aspect of their treatment, conditions or work demands. I say semi-open because the workers refuse to stay in the situation, but usually conceal the real reasons from their employers. Exit itself can be political as well as practical. As domestic workers are increasingly known for changing jobs frequently, one could conclude that workers are now "resisting" more.

However, one must inquire as to the impact of this resistance. Oftentimes it is a practical move for the worker, who can leave the undesirable situation, although the issues still remain unaddressed, and turn her attention to finding another job. When workers quit, they frequently give unrelated excuses that do not blame their employers, such as needing to return home or needing a higher-paying job. They sometimes obliquely hint at the unsuitability of the job and hence the employer, by suggesting that the employer should find someone more suitable. This type of departure has little positive impact on worker-employer relations. It reduces the risk to the worker, but when workers leave without forewarning or signs of discontent, employers start treating workers with mistrust, and the workers do not have the psychological satisfaction of having their complaints heard by the offending party.

At the far end of the spectrum is a more visible and open resistance which Scott characterizes as unusual: "dissimulation is the characteristic and necessary pose of subordinate classes everywhere most of the time—a fact that makes those rare and threatening moments when the pose is abandoned all the more remarkable."¹⁸² Indeed, most workers choose not to display their feelings, which could be considered awkward and embarrassing for both parties. I interpret open resistance or self-advocacy as involving the divulgence of true sentiments or at least disagreement, and acting to recover something the employer has unjustly withheld or taken from them, whether it be wages, food, dignity, or their autonomy. Negotiating also involves assertions that the workers need or deserve something more than what their employers are offering. Scott claims that the "dependent individual" will normally just show part of their full "transcript" to those in power, and only reveal their full transcript in unusual cases of

¹⁸² Ibid., 284.

extreme emotion or need.¹⁸³ At first glance, this would seem the case for some domestic workers, such as when they resort to calling the police when denied their wages. However this assumption does not reveal the full picture, and attributes self-advocacy to their loss of control over emotions, such as desperation or anger. Although women certainly may feel desperate or angry, resistance does not suddenly arise without precedent. The willingness to stand up for oneself emerges from individuals' and workers' collective understandings about injustice, dignity and desire.

Open resistance for women in their private lives sometimes includes exit. Leaving one's spouse and family for personal reasons is a powerful statement, even if one cannot truly sever the ties because of one's children. In these cases, the reasons why the women leave are very clear to the offending parties. When women are so dedicated to their families that they endure many hardships to earn money for them, it is significant when they leave against the will of their husbands or other family members. Departure is a claim for independence and self-respect.

SILENCE, DEFERENCE AND EXIT

The experiences of the women in the first two case studies inform their socio-political awareness about domestic workers' subordination, but for the most part, they believe that they cannot or should not speak up for themselves in the workplace. They will leave a job if it is intolerable, but otherwise their priority is to earn money for their children. Silence, deference and exit are characteristic of the way these workers deal with challenging work situations.

Lian Jian Case Study

Familial Subordination

Lian Jian is a 52-year-old domestic worker, who is working to put her two daughters through college. Lian says that she has led a difficult life, and her happiest memories are from her youth. She married twice, both times unhappily. Her first husband was "engaged in dishonest work" as a petty thief. After he escaped from the police and left his friend to be sentenced to more than ten years, she left him and took the girls. Her

¹⁸³ Ibid., 286.

second husband was wealthier but kept mistresses and was severely abusive towards her, battering her after drinking. He also owed money to criminals who pursued them and their shared possessions, so they divorced and he gave her the house since she was caring for their children. Lian's experiences with men have left her mistrusting, and she believes that women must work to be free:

If we rural women don't have work then we get bullied, if you spend other people's money (like her husband's), then you have to speak nicely to them, you have to wait upon them every day. If you haven't cooked well, then they can curse at you. Now however I'm much better, I'm not beaten or bullied.

Lian recognizes the power of money from her own life experiences. Dependency can enslave one so that one is at the mercy of controlling and abusive behavior, or money can liberate one. Her collective "we" indicates her socio-political awareness of rural gendered relationships and the prevalence of abuse, which the worker in the following case study also experienced. Lian recognizes that she and other women do not belong to the dominant rural culture which is patriarchal and punitive, so as long as they remain in the countryside, they must adapt themselves in order to fit in. However, she now spends most of her time in the city.

Lian reasons that if she had been educated and continued beyond elementary school, she could have had a better job and would not need to depend on a man. This rationale may make her even more determined to educate her daughters, whom she prioritizes above herself:

My children are my motivation. Since I have children, I have motivation. If I didn't have children, I wouldn't have any motivation [in life]. My own life isn't anything of interest. My husband treated me badly, and we are divorced now.

Most of my interviewees are motivated more by family goals than personal goals, in fact, very few professed to having goals for themselves that are not related to the well-being of their families. Her subordination as a rural woman and wife has taught her that the only way one can escape abuse, is by earning a living. She can escape subordination in the countryside, but then becomes vulnerable as a domestic worker.

Subordination within the Workplace

Within the workplace, Lian exhibits the same strong work ethic as in her youth. Prior to decollectivization, she was proud of her ability to earn as many work points as men through her labor, and now often mentions that she works with “all her heart and might.” Like many workers, she believes that she must persist in working hard within an environment in which discrimination is common. In her accounts there is a significant disparity between how she feels about the poor treatment of domestic workers, and her responses. She once worked for an elderly man who was over 90 years old, and who upon finding out that she was not living with her husband, asked her to sleep with him. She found his behavior and expectations to be extremely insulting, and quit. Although she felt humiliated, she did not tell his adult children because they would not have believed her. Lian also talked about the implications of washing underwear for clients, which agencies often tell workers they do not have to do.

When you want other people to wash your underwear, [people] who don't want to do it, then it isn't an issue of washing, it is like an insult to your character. That's what I think, that they look down on you. They think that you do manual labor so you'll do whatever they ask you to do, [so] they ask you to wash their underwear. Afterwards I thought, who cares if I wash the old lady's underwear, she's too old to have a menstrual period and is clean, so I'll wash if asked. But I also put up with [things], because if you don't tolerate them you won't be working there for long.

Having described certain actions as “insults” or “humiliating,” it is clear that Lian is fully aware of the subordination, and believes that it occurs because the employers see themselves as superior to workers and think they can take advantage of them. Hong Zhu, who writes about *dagongmei* discourse tactics, categorizes the most silent female migrant workers as “*shiyuzhe*,” or those who have lost speech. She says that these workers lack the cultural ability to meaningfully communicate with urban citizens, and that this leads them to lowly work positions as well as the lowest wages.¹⁸⁴ However, this “cultural” ability to communicate is actually more related to socio-political power. Lian does not articulate her feelings to her employers because of how she perceives their power relations and her lack of ability to influence the situation. Her view on the power of money, learnt from her relations with her ex-husbands, applies to the

¹⁸⁴ Hong Zhu, ““Dagongmei de huayu celue yu chengshi shiying” (Working Sisters' Discourse Tactics and their Urban Adaptation),” *Nanjing Daxue Xuebao (Zhhexue, Renwen Kexue, Shehui Kexue) Journal of Nanjing University (Philosophy, Humanities, and Social Sciences)* 4(2008): 140.

following quote. She suggests that those with money cannot buy the hearts of others, but they can buy silence and compliance:

Whatever the employer says is justified, whatever we say is not [considered] justified, anyways you need to listen to what people say, you can't talk back to them. If you answer back they might not keep you on, we don't dare answer back. Anyway, I work with all my heart and might. I think the employers should be satisfied.

Like many other workers, Lian chooses to remain relatively silent in response to employers' demands, and to improve her work relations through her efforts. The above quotation captures her lack of voice and her powerlessness to respond. In her view, domestic workers' knowledge and opinions do not mean much to employers when in contradiction to their own. She speaks in the plural, implying that for domestic workers as a group, only their labor is valued but not their intellect or voice. Nonetheless, Lian does not see herself as completely powerless in the workplace. As does Su, she believes she can improve relations with her employers by appealing to them emotionally through her efforts and through gift-giving. If one couple she worked for had not divorced, she would have employed the following strategy to improve their relations:

I would have kept on working for them, I could tolerate it. No matter whose home I go to, if I want to do this job well then I work with all my heart and might. I can also bring them some local products from my hometown, give them things, and then over time we will get along better.

Lian's experiences of subordination have informed her socio-political consciousness, which tells her that women are treated as subordinate to men, and that she is subordinate to her employers. Lian has been mistreated both as a rural woman, and as a domestic worker. However, because of her experiences with her former husbands, it is not so much her capacity to resist that matters, but her financial independence. She feels she has little agency to combat the "specter of class" and the poor treatment legitimized within her labor relations. Her need for financial independence informs her coping tactics, which involve her decision to work hard and remain silent. Lian swallows her humiliation, although she exits situations she considers immoral or intolerable. Though she is unhappily aware of her status, and believes that she needs to perform deference in the workplace, Lian is also liberated from both husbands and working to support her dreams for her daughters. In the end, she proved the efficaciousness of her strategy to me. She brought two hand-embroidered insoles with fuschia peonies as a gift, the result of multiple days of work. Touched by the gift and her candid accounts of her harsh life

experiences, after the interviews I promised her some of my furniture when I left Beijing. When the time came for her to collect the furniture which I then realized she intended to sell, her attitude had changed from friendly and confiding to distant and business-like. As I was moving overseas, she no longer needed to maintain our relations, so could reveal her “full transcript” and act more assertively.

Song Case Analysis

Familial Subordination

Song is a 37-year-old live-in domestic worker from Gansu, who looks far older than her years. She grew up in poverty and attended school so infrequently that she was functionally illiterate by the time she migrated to Beijing. In 1989, she got married at 18, as did most people in her village. Her sister-in-law’s husband acted as matchmaker. When I asked what she thought about meeting her future husband for the first time, she replied, “at that time I was too stupid, I didn’t know what was good and what wasn’t, but whatever my parents said was the way it was, I didn’t dare ignore them.” Her family also needed her to get married because they had too many sons, not enough land and not enough food or even clothing at that time. Song got married out of obligation to her family and obedience or fear of saying no, but it was also standard for other women to marry young.

Her marriage ended up with an unhappy and unforeseen outcome. Song said,

Things were still ok the first two months after I got married, but after that my mother-in-law said that I always liked to go have fun and then didn’t allow me to go out. When I was about to go out, my husband wasn’t happy, and his mother would say things that were really unpleasant to hear. He was always getting mad at me, about this or that. When he was still with his mother, whatever his mother said was the final word. At that time I was always feeling bad, I wasn’t really happy, I just tended to cry all the time. When there was no freedom, it was like there was always a knot in my heart.

At some point she and her husband separated from his parents’ household. However, she was still treated badly. Furthermore, Song’s circumstances appeared to be the norm in the village, which may have led her to believe there was no alternative. She said,

People in the countryside are all backward. If people say that you can do something, then that makes you really want to do it. If they said that you should

hit your wife, then you want even more to hit her, that sort of thing. (I asked how common this was) All the women in the village suffer, it wasn't just me. They all suffer. The men (husbands) all beat them sometimes, and sometimes they are all affectionate. After they hit you, you still have to work.

Here Song shows she is aware, at least in retrospect, of the dynamics of gendered violence, and like Lian, recognizes women's lack of social power and ability to change their situation. Song too was verbally and physically abused by her husband, and the fact that she remained in the marriage despite this treatment, suggests that she believed herself to be as powerless as the other women from her village.

Song remained in her husband's village until she migrated for work, but she said she also migrated once before she was married. In both cases she insisted on leaving despite the objection first of her mother, and then of her husband. She illustrated their controlling and unsupportive attitudes:

The first time that I migrated to the city, my mother didn't let me go, she said that if you are hungry then you can just starve at home, you don't have to go to starve in some other place. But then my family just couldn't get by anymore, and I absolutely had to go. Before my husband said he wouldn't let me go, he said that we share each other's crimes and fortunes; he mistakenly thought that I was going to come out to enjoy a comfortable life while leaving him behind to endure hardship. That was his meaning, but our family had no money, we had little land, we didn't have enough to eat, and didn't have enough money to spend. So he agreed with me that I should come out, and so I came out.

In making her decision to migrate, Song persisted despite initially being told she could not, however she also attributes her motivation to caring for her family's well-being. She takes the responsibility to keep her family from starving and she succeeds both in migrating and keeping her family going. Song's professed priorities in life are earning enough for her son to get married (she did not mention her hopes for her 18-year-old daughter) and to rebuild their family home which was destroyed in the Sichuan earthquake. She denies having any plans or dreams for herself, her family comes first. Although she would be interested in learning any number of things, she does not consider herself capable. She periodically refers to herself as stupid and unable to learn, and mentions her inability to read, although she also admits that she's learned many practical things since first coming to Beijing. This sheds light on Song's perceptions of her own capabilities and potential. I will later address this term "perceived capabilities," which is analogous to self-efficacy, and relates to how perceptions about one's capabilities can influence how one chooses to act. Song has sought happiness in the past,

but her actions and choices have been for the most part circumscribed by those with power over her, and by her family obligations.

Subordination within the Workplace

Song's accounts of her work experiences show that she is very aware of when she has been mistreated, such as when she was given very little to eat and not allowed to leave for days at a stretch. However, she tends to leave a bad job within days. When an elderly disabled man attempted to sexually harass her, she said to his son "older brother, your family needs another appropriate person, look for another, I want to leave." She expressed her anger to me, but did not reveal it to the employer, and agreed to stay a few more days until he found a replacement. She too, feels hesitant about telling the employer the truth, and is likely afraid that it would cause trouble. Song said that since she was very young, she would not cause trouble with others. What she thinks is not necessarily positive, but whatever comes out of her mouth is. On the other hand, she said she is willing to give anything to people who are nice to her, but if people are not nice to her, she hates them. This powerful word, "hate," underlines her frustration and anger at being mistreated. The outcome of her actions is that she now protects herself, but her lack of authentic voice or expression of her "full transcript" leaves her with suppressed anger.

Although Song's major decisions were both motivated by her dedication to her family's well-being, and her main roles as wife and provider, she does protect herself when she can. She looks out for her own well-being in the city even though she has to pay a fine to the housekeeping agency for leaving jobs early, and has to pay every night she sleeps in the agency between jobs. In these cases, her well-being and her dignity come before saving money for her family. Song displays anger against those who treat her badly, although she keeps it hidden from them. Many workers display these two traits; they are driven by family obligations, and will leave bad work situations without voicing the real reason why.

These two case studies share striking similarities. Their experiences of subordination within intimate relations have fostered their socio-political consciousness about rural women's lack of power and agency in a patriarchal countryside. Both women left their families behind, but their decisions were motivated by their strong familial identities and obligations. Lian left her first husband for her daughters' well-being, and Song

migrated to earn money for her family after accepting an arranged marriage in exchange for goods for her family. Although these women can exercise some agency when in the city by leaving bad work situations, they do not feel they can challenge these power relations, even in minor ways. When sexually harassed in the workplace, both decide to not tell their employers, and to leave without “causing trouble.” Women like Lian and Song who do not see themselves as being in a position or space from which they can transform their situation, and still end up accommodating those who subordinate them, in order to get by. They feel angry, mistreated, and humiliated by their public and private experiences of subordination. However, their anger remains hidden, and they either choose to perform their subordinate roles as good domestic workers or exit. Their actions are not transgressive, but safely fall within the narrow boundaries they see as permissible and possible.

Silence

Silence in the case of domestic workers such as Lian and Song is based on the belief that they have little power. Those who are subordinated or oppressed, and who continue to submit, are likely to then find it harder to eventually articulate their own voices to their employers. Freire suggests that,

Men who are submitted to concrete conditions of oppression in which they become alienated “beings for another” of the false “being for himself” on whom they depend, are not able to develop authentically. Deprived of their own power of decision, which is located in the oppressor, they follow the prescriptions of the latter. The oppressed only begin to develop when, surmounting the contradiction in which they are caught, they become “beings for themselves.”¹⁸⁵

This passage paints a picture in which the oppressed come to believe they have little autonomy, so respond by acting in accordance with those who have power. They cannot “develop authentically” while submitting to their oppressors. For Freire, authentic development of the oppressed occurs with their self-empowerment and resistance. Based on Freire’s statement, if workers have been dehumanized, they can only reclaim their humanity once they are willing to stand up for themselves. This also suggests that when domestic workers quit because of mistreatment or exploitation, but are deferent and do not tell their employers the real reason, they are not reclaiming their power from

¹⁸⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: 161.

the employer, and therefore are also still less than fully human in their employer's eyes. The oppressor is not (re)educated by the oppressed, but can continue his or her behavior without being held accountable. Freire says that people must participate in the pursuit of liberation. The question is, would be it truly be liberating if a worker leaves a bad work situation but remains silent? Liberation requires "regaining their humanity" hence being able to act as human beings and reject their dehumanization.¹⁸⁶ I suggest that these workers who leave are free in one sense but not in another, for they have not necessarily reclaimed their dignity. Many memories of past subordination also continue to haunt them, and remind them of their low social position.

Because of the nature of domestic work, even the few workers who advocate for themselves, must at times comply and remain silent. Lang consistently tries to negotiate with her employers over work issues, however in the daily negotiation of power, she sometimes holds back her words and assumes a smiling face:

No matter how your relationship is with the client or employer, no matter what type of friction there is, first you should think of how to negotiate a settlement. Usually you can settle [an issue], but if you can't, then we (domestics) have to assume an apologetic attitude. If they (clients) say some nasty things then we have to take it. If we were clearly wrong, then we can only take it, we can only bear and forbear it. Whether we've worked a whole day or a few hours, we still want to be paid for it...Say there are two of us, one is rigid, so then the other one has to be soft and yielding, to make apologies and say nice things like "next time I'll work harder for you," or "if this time it wasn't ok, then next time I'll do better or I'll find you someone better." As long as there's someone making trouble, then you can only say nice and gentle things, or you won't get your pay...[Sometimes] we know we are justified, they know we are justified, but they still say that they are right. What can we do?...We have to take into consideration that we are here to earn money.

Since the main goal of domestic workers is to earn enough money for their families, many of them share the pragmatic and resigned attitude that Lang expresses. However, while others commonly resign themselves to enduring (*ren* or *renshou*) subordination, Lang only resigns herself to performing this degree of deference when negotiation fails.

Silence is part of a strategy of non-conflict, in which although the workers wish they could speak out, they choose not to, and instead try to influence their situation through other means such as pleasing, deferring to and emotionally moving their clients. Their power to change their situation lies in satisfying their clients, which may include words

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 68.

or acts of deference, and demonstrating that they accept their separate and lower position in the household. Judith Rollins also observed this in her study of domestic workers:

[who] were in agreement that employers liked subservient behavior and did not like a domestic's being too educated or intelligent, too materially well off, or too attractive. Part of being a domestic was acting like the person the employer wanted her domestic to be. The better this performance, the greater the probability of the domestic receiving more than the minimum in material and emotional awards.¹⁸⁷

However, I submit that this choice of silence and deference is not truly a free choice, because if they are expected to not challenge what they are told to do or how they are expected to act, then they are effectively silenced. And as Albert Hirschman mentions, the very existence of the option to exit (or to remain silent), can "atrophy the development of the art of the voice."¹⁸⁸ As domestic workers frequently switch jobs, they can become used to leaving without ever communicating their concerns to their employers, and hence lack Bandura's "mastery experiences" to advocate for themselves, as well as the confidence to speak out.

To my explanation of silence, I add the influence of identity as it relates to a form of voice or perceptions about one's voice which are ultimately non-transformative. Voice is strongly related to identity and one's sense of self, but certain forms of voice either reflect workers' silence, or when used by domestic workers, can result in further silencing. In Belenky's and her colleagues' work on women's self-concepts and ways of knowing, they noted that "the development of a sense of voice, mind and self were intricately intertwined," and found that for their respondents it was a metaphor which related to a "sense of mind, self-worth, and feelings of isolation from or connection to others."¹⁸⁹ I draw links between how domestic workers describe their speaking or listening, and their sense of personal power and belief that they can change their own paths. When Song's parents first informed her of her arranged marriage, she said, "I didn't dare not listen...I didn't dare say I was not going [to meet him]." She also said "at that time I was too stupid." These metaphors of voice and depiction of self embody

¹⁸⁷ Rollins, *Between Women*: 147.

¹⁸⁸ Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 43.

¹⁸⁹ Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldenberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1986/1997), 18.

Song's lack of power and autonomy in relation to her parents, and her naiveté at that time. Song still exhibits a lack of voice, and a low sense of self-worth.

Silencing of workers' voices through subordination means that they must hold back their feelings about being discriminated against, dehumanized, or exploited, and even if they quit, they may still feel wronged and angry. Song left bad work situations but feels angry when she recalls them, perhaps because she remained silent and never held the individuals accountable for offending her. Subordination has a negative psychological impact on these workers, whose actions although logical, may still feel like a tacit acceptance of their subordinate position. Workers' accounts show that long after an event had occurred, they were still thinking about it and felt resentful. I propose that when one remains silent and dwells on the injustice, it simply augments one's resentment and feelings of being oppressed and powerless. Migrant women when interviewed are also sometimes worried that they cannot speak well or might say the "wrong" thing because of their low education. Many of them have lost confidence because they did not do well in school, and some disparage their own intelligence. Perhaps they associate "voice" with the intellect, whereas they associate themselves with the capacity for physical labor.

I note two predominant types of voice with which domestic workers speak out to authoritative others, voices of care and voices of resistance, which are used in situations of unequal power relations or conflict.¹⁹⁰ Here I will refer to the voice of reason and care which the workers adopt when they try to communicate or work things out. It can be risky for domestic workers to reason with their employers because their opinions are often not welcome, even if spoken in pursuit of better service. These employers do not want to hear an opinion or suggestion that challenges theirs, no matter how softly said or how inoffensive. We do not know how frequently workers communicate in this way, we only know that many workers think that speaking out is neither safe nor welcome within certain work relations, so default to a state of silence and *ren* (enduring) until they cannot stand their situation any longer. Lang once spoke to a client to suggest the most efficient order in which to clean the room, and to save the client time and money. The client replied, "How come you are speaking [to me] like this? You do what I tell

¹⁹⁰ These voices of care and resistance reflect Carol Gilligan's moral voices of care and justice which demonstrate an individual's orientation towards a moral issue. However, I speak of voices of care and resistance which entail risk and alienation particularly within the context of unequal power relations. Carol Gilligan, Janie Victoria Ward, Jill McLean Taylor with Betty Bardige, ed. *Mapping the Moral Domain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 144.

you to.” When Lang spoke up again to explain her logic, she was criticized for having a bad attitude. Workers who are reprimanded in this way for speaking out may become more hesitant about communicating with their employers. Certainly, many more factors conspire to create a culture and practice of silence for the people who are most susceptible to Farmer’s “structural violence,”¹⁹¹ than those which offer a glimmer of hope for change.

NEGOTIATION, RESISTANCE AND SELF-EFFICACY

Two cases that represent the small minority of workers have been selected to demonstrate how some workers reject others’ attempts to control their lives and work. The older worker Xiang is more articulate about her motivations for her actions than 18 year-old Xiao, but both are willing to push the boundaries of what employers and others consider acceptable. Despite her poverty and her low status in the city, Xiang in particular feels empowered, and her speech and actions substantiate her self-perceptions. She is at the far end of the spectrum of action. Her source of strength is within; she does not need to turn to others for consultation nor does she appear to hesitate at the risk of speaking out. Unlike silenced workers, these workers sometimes feel compelled to point out injustices and to try to alter their situation.

Xiao Case Analysis

Familial Subordination

This case study was also selected to contrast how two members of a family, despite sharing the commonalities of background, poverty, low education and domestic work jobs, have pursued dissimilar actions in response to subordination. Song has an 18-year-old daughter, Xiao. As opposed to her mother who would ideally like to return home to farm, Xiao’s identity lies with the city where she has spent her most independent years. Even though she is also earning money for her parents, she has no desire to return to her hometown. Just as her mother’s life had taken a turn for the worse when the question of marriage arose, Xiao’s life became difficult at age 11 when she discovered that she’d been engaged since birth to her cousin. She attributes the engagement to her parents’

¹⁹¹ Farmer, *Pathologies of Power*.

lack of education, but it is also clear that her mother was looking out for her aging brother who had an adopted son, but no wife to care for him. Song thought if Xiao married the adopted son, she could then take care of Song's brother.

Xiao thought the arranged marriage was frightening, and was determined not to marry her cousin. She said that dead or alive she would not go to his village, and so made plans on her own to migrate to Beijing to work. Since her mother was in Beijing, she was allowed to migrate with fellow villagers. From the ages of 11 to 13, Xiao made three major life decisions, dropping out of school, refusing the arranged marriage, and migrating to Beijing for work. She was successful in carrying out all three, which may have given her greater confidence in defying common norms and expectations. Here it is useful to consider Bandura's concept of mastery experiences, with which success builds a belief in one's self-efficacy or ability to perform well and achieve favorable outcomes in a particular area.¹⁹² Self-efficacy is an aspect of self-identity which reflects how individuals view their capacity to effect change. Bandura claims that one's self-efficacy beliefs shape one's actions and goals, the efforts and perseverance one puts forth despite challenges, and even one's resilience and actual outcomes.¹⁹³ He suggests that when people with higher self-efficacy envision success, they are able to cope better with stress, and with greater confidence, they employ more assertive or flexible strategies.¹⁹⁴ As mentioned previously, I also refer to self-efficacy as one's perceived capabilities. If one has a diminished sense of one's perceived capabilities, one is likely to choose safer and less risky strategies, and perhaps even to decide to put up with greater hardships and mistreatment. Bandura's concept is useful for thinking about the psychological aspect of action and agency.

Partly because it may be more difficult to believe that one could be capable of successfully challenging the norms and expectations of those with power, workers are likely to have a stronger sense of their perceived capability to satisfy their employers, than to stand up for themselves in times of difficulty. This is likely true of any hierarchical work relationship. Workers who stand up for themselves need to feel they could cope with the unpredictability and unknown repercussions of such acts. However, it is psychologically easier to deal with the more predictable results of either pleasing their employer or leaving with an appropriate excuse.

¹⁹² Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory of Gender Development and Differentiation," 23.

¹⁹³ Albert Bandura, "Guide for Constructing Self-Efficacy Scales," in *Self-Efficacy Beliefs of Adolescents*, ed. Tim Urdan and Frank Pajares, (Information Age Publishing 2006), 309; *ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ ———, "Social Cognitive Theory," 29-30.

In analyzing Xiao's decisions, I want to first address the fact that unlike her mother, she rejected the idea of sacrificing herself for her extended family. From age 11, Xiao was able to not only distinguish between her own well-being and that of her family, but defied family pressure. Ten years ago, early arranged marriage and marriage to relatives were not uncommon in some parts of rural China, although clearly there was some controversy within her rural community, indicated by her references to people gossiping behind her back. Although the social outcome of her actions was to strain her relationship with her family and generate gossip within her village, Xiao's main concern was how she herself would be affected if she went through with the marriage. She felt the outcome of her decision to migrate was positive. Once in Beijing she said that she felt much better because she did not have to deal with the gossip, which made her irritated and miserable. Xiao also took the initiative to find work in Beijing. She was tall as a 13 year old, so she was able to get work even though the minimum age was 18. She lied to the housekeeping agency, telling them that she'd lost her identity card and would apply for a replacement.

Rather than teaching her to sacrifice herself for the greater good of her family, I suggest that Xiao's early experiences taught her that she needs to look out for herself, and that she cannot rely on her family or community to look out for her interests. She learned early on to identify what her own interests were versus what others felt would be best for her. Other young rural girls of 13 would likely feel dependent upon their families and unable to refuse an arranged marriage, but Xiao privileged her autonomy above all else. In Beijing she recreated her own community of supportive friends, with whom she meets once a week.

Subordination in the Workplace

Having demonstrated her independence from her family, Xiao also proves that she is willing to advocate for herself at work. She has done live-in domestic work and cooked fast-food. Restaurant work is preferable she says, because:

when working in a restaurant, there's a time when you start and you get off work, and there are also more people (co-workers). In people's homes, in the end you are the only outsider and have to work there day after day. When you stay 24 hours a day in people's homes there are a lot of things you have to watch out for, like their facial expressions.

Domestic work for Xiao is alienating; it involves subordination and a loss of dignity.

Xiao had found one fast-food job through the housekeeping agency. To begin with, she had to work 14 hours a day instead of a promised 8 hours. After the third day she wanted to quit, but agreed to hold on until the boss found a replacement. He strung her out with excuses, delaying her pay each month until eventually half a year had passed. After some time, she started arguing every day with her boss and then finally left. She said she was still thinking of how to get her wages back. She called the boss, but he said he is too busy to talk to her. She deliberated about either going directly to his house or contacting the Labor Bureau. When asked how she makes this type of decision, Xiao says that she will not just lose her temper right away. Instead she'll pretend that nothing has happened, and then take some time to think about how to resolve it. Although she initially indulged her boss with his excuses and was waiting to get her full wages, she generally exercises forethought, persistence and sees self-advocacy as the way to solve such situations. This suggests that she has a reasonable sense of self-efficacy about protecting her interests.

After her interview, Xiao continued to help me, going out of her way to bring me interviewees, and to take me to interview some small housekeeping agencies. Although she and her family were in difficult financial straits, she refused any compensation and just said she wanted to help. I can only guess that she hoped that my research would raise awareness about the situation of domestic workers. She insisted on waiting outside in the wintery cold, while I and a Chinese colleague talked with the agency staff who referred disparagingly to the poor quality of female domestic workers and their lack of education. It seemed that by bringing me to agencies that she'd worked with, Xiao not only enabled my research, but created her own space for a counter-discourse against the agencies as sources of authority and knowledge. When I mentioned some of the staff's statements to Xiao, she kept saying that what we were told was not true, that they had lied to us. Having spent two years with that agency, she knew they did not offer that particular training, they did not mediate workers' disputes, and workers had to pay five RMB per night to sleep at the agency, it was not free. I suggest that Xiao saw herself as working to help others through my research; she could envision change, a possible alternative future for subordinated domestic workers.

Xiao and her mother's actions are related to how they interpret and accept their familial obligations and others' expectations, their approaches to conflict and how they

see themselves as being able to learn and effect change. Xiao too is filial. She contributes money to her family, but will not sacrifice her well-being for an arranged marriage. She is willing to speak out when mistreated, unlike her mother. Some might suggest that she only advocated for herself at work to get back her wages, that anyone desperate for their wages would have done the same. I have observed a greater degree of resistance in situations that are desperate, such as serious discrimination, harassment, exploitation or entrapment. However, in this case, Xiao does not only advocate for herself because she needed her wages. She also has a history of standing up for herself, which demonstrates a consistency in her attitude towards situations of injustice.

There may be links between people's views of their own learning and their willingness to assert themselves. Xiao yearns to learn other skills such as how to use computers, but thinks it is impossible because she cannot afford the fees. Her mother feels it is impossible to learn because of her own lack of ability. Mary Field Belenky and her collaborators who worked on women's psychology and development, generated categories of women's perspectives on learning and knowing. For my purposes these categories are too narrow, but it is useful to consider one facet of the "received knowers." Received knowers' low opinion of their own learning and knowledge in comparison to authorities, is linked to their lack of "a critical stance towards knowledge" and unwillingness to question authorities. When people see their own knowledge as being inferior, they tend to comply with authority and dominant norms rather than questioning them. Importantly, they rarely see themselves as having the capacity to pass on knowledge.¹⁹⁵ The mother, Song, appears to fall within this category. Her limited belief in the power of her mind may well prevent her from thinking she can challenge those who have higher education and the ability to express themselves well. Song went to school intermittently for a few years, then was tutored by an employer to read and write a bit. So, despite knowing that she was able to learn at an older age, she still doubts the power of her mind.

Both Xiao and her mother possess socio-political consciousness about subordination from their own and others' experiences. Their resistance shown by leaving when mistreated is political and reflects their inner critique of power. The difference in their resistance and the ways that they see themselves as agents, is that the daughter has

¹⁹⁵ Mary Field Belenky, Lynne A. Bond, and Jacqueline S. Weinstock, *A Tradition That Has No Name: Nurturing the Development of People, Families, and Communities* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 59.

found her public voice, as it were; she does not keep to James Scott's hidden transcripts, as her mother does.

Xiang's Case Study

Xiang, who I have already mentioned throughout the dissertation, is a principled and fierce self-advocate. Born in 1962, Xiang was one of seven siblings. Her family struggled without enough to eat till she turned 17. She graduated from junior high school, but her family could not afford for her to continue her education. Xiang's account is notable for her resilience regardless of failure, and her readiness to speak out for herself.

Challenges in Marriage and Entrepreneurship

In contrast to Su, whose account constitutes the final extended case study, Xiang's difficult marriage and her husband's bad temper have not prevented her from following her own ideas about migration and work. Like other workers, in retrospect, she criticized how young girls back in her time did not seriously reflect on marriage. And like many of them, she has remained with her husband:

At that time people were stupid, they didn't think about things that much. So when you were of age, then you looked for a boyfriend and got married. I was introduced to my husband, but our marriage hasn't been good. He has an awful temper, so we often fight. (Xiang explained why they are still together) I have a feudal mentality. My mind is still *fengjian* (feudal). It's not like how things are now with divorce, there wasn't that way of thinking before, and [we also stayed together] because of our two children.

Although Xiang has remained in her unhappy marriage and confesses to being old-fashioned about divorce, she has taken the initiative to direct the family's migrant work ventures. As her husband has almost no education, she considers him unable to speak well or to come up with creative ideas to earn money. She started a small but unsuccessful business in 1998 in Shijiazhuang, then worked at home in a printing factory, but again failed to earn enough to continue. In 2004 it was her idea to do contract farming in Tianjin, but they did not earn anything. In 2005 they came to Beijing and she started another small business in an area that was then slated for destruction. After their store was destroyed, Xiang went into domestic work, delivered

lunches for a fast-food restaurant and had her early morning business selling *jianbing* (Chinese crepes). Despite having had a hard life and multiple failed enterprises, Xiang persists both because of financial need and because she will seize an opportunity if she knows she is able to do the work: “I was born in the year of the Tiger, I’m really ambitious, yet I haven’t come across anyone who supports me.”

Xiang possesses a high sense of self-efficacy; she is the “doer” of the family. Because no one else supports her, she feels that she needs to be the driving force. This is clear from her actions. Despite the insecure nature of hourly work jobs, she provided herself with multiple small sources of income, including cultivating some regular clients for cleaning jobs, and hence has stabilized and increased her family’s income. She is therefore less dependent on any one source of income, employer or agency. In her case, failures do not cause her to give up. From experience she knows that she is resourceful and resilient and can always start anew, so is more willing to continue to take risks and stand up for herself. Yet she has supposedly always been unafraid of hard work and standing up for others, so such an attitude would also cultivate resourcefulness and resilience. It is significant that after having such a bitter (*ku*) life and failed ventures, she has not become more risk-averse. Consistency in attitude and action has worked for her, and her performances of “open public transcripts” are a result of her firm belief in justice. She does not feel intimidated by her husband’s temper, and although she previously considered leaving him, she worried that he would be lost and taken advantage of without her. Hence, Xiang sees herself more as his protector than his victim.

Subordination in the Workplace and Public Arena

When Xiang had little domestic work experience, she took an hourly job that she found on her own. After cleaning the floors and surfaces of a large apartment for two and a half hours she asked for 15 RMB pay, but the pregnant client would only give her 10 RMB. She accepted it a bit reluctantly but reasoned that at least the agency would not take a cut from these wages. She returned a second time and worked for four hours, after which the woman said she would only pay her for two. Xiang asked why, and the woman replied that last time Xiang did the work in two hours, ignoring the fact that she’d asked her to do much more the second time. Xiang became angry,

I'd never come across something like this, my god, I even yelled at her. I said "aren't you being unreasonable? Last time do you know what work I did? This time do you know what work I did?" She asked how come people at hotels can change quilt covers in a few minutes. I said "why don't you ask someone from a hotel to come change your quilt covers then?" Right? The two of us argued, argued and argued. [She said] If I didn't leave, 110 (the police) would come. That would suit me, I went and called 110. They told me to come down and said "you say you worked four hours but she would say that you worked two hours." Now what can we [domestic workers] do about this [situation]? We can only put up with it.

Instead of accepting being short-changed, Xiang was angered and tried a variety of tactics to try to persuade or push the woman to pay her, including reprimands, sarcasm and calling the police. Despite the fact that she had no evidence to prove she had done four hours of work and had to tolerate the injustice in the end, it was more important for Xiang to stand up for herself. She identifies herself as someone who cannot stand by and idly watch injustice being done, she wants to speak out and defend herself and others against injustice. She told me of two situations in which she advocated for herself, when told by a vendor and a restaurant owner to move her crepe stand, and she was able to salvage her dignity, even winning an apology. She reasoned with them as equals and asserted her equal right to be there and earn a living:

Whoever comes, whoever acts against me, I will go against them. What I'm doing is correct, what's not correct about earning money? If you don't let me do it, then you don't do it either. I'm not like other people, I deal with things straightforwardly.

Some of Xiang's actions are based on her consciousness of social inequality. When Xiang discusses how those with money have always scorned the poor, she is in effect saying that subordination is political and often instigated by those with money. Her actions and resistance, however, are fundamentally based on her ideas about fairness and her self-identity as someone who stands up to injustice. She lives up to her own expectations rather than others'. In her accounts, she is consistently willing to risk embarrassment, censure and conflict, even when it might be easier to acquiesce. Among all the domestic workers I interviewed, Xiang showed the highest level of connection between her self-identity, attitude towards justice, and resistance.

Both Xiao and Xiang believe it is possible to be efficacious in their resistance and self-advocacy. In Xiang's accounts, she refuses to admit she is less entitled to fair treatment and opportunities, and will not stand for bullying. By refusing to acknowledge

social difference or bow to bullying, she is effectively preventing it from being reproduced. Xiang's voice is part of her repertoire of relational tools which she readily accesses and uses to solve interpersonal issues. Xiao had some difficulty expressing herself in our interactions and was often reticent, but can access her voice when dealing with serious issues. These workers do not need social or familial approval to make major decisions or resolve situations that adversely impact their well-being. When they are treated poorly as migrant workers (or crepe sellers), despite expectations for them to yield to others and avoid conflict, Xiao and Xiang believe that they have the space in which to resist, and act accordingly. Because of their strong sense of perceived capabilities derived from multiple instances of successful self-advocacy even prior to commencing domestic work, these workers do not change their tactics for countering subordination, but continue to struggle to obtain justice.

Voice

When analyzing workers' actions, one should take the possibility of "voice" into consideration, voice as in being able to question authority or as in speaking out. This less common form of resistance can have transformative implications. When women find their public voice and choose to continue to speak out despite the risks, exercising their voice can be psychologically and even politically empowering, and their actions may serve as an example to their peers and co-workers. If successful, they may also alter their unequal power relations with those who subordinate them.

Voice is related to how workers' socio-political consciousness aligns with their approach to subordination, their willingness to engage with risk, and how they think they should and can (perceived capabilities) deal with poor treatment. The hourly worker Lang understands that it is not just individual and personality differences that cause some employers to treat workers poorly. Her socio-political consciousness tells her that some employers discriminate systematically against domestic workers because they believe workers to be inferior. She said: "Some people, they don't just discriminate against you, they have an attitude about all domestic workers. They think that they are so superior, and that people like us are lower class. They'll have you do any [and every] type of work." Lang is not resigned to this situation, but rather interprets it as requiring her to be proactive in protecting herself. She advises that one should talk about things upfront and in advance about the employer's expectations. If they are excessive, then

the worker should tell her client that she cannot fulfill her requests. Communicating to what degree she can meet the client's expectations is the important first step in reducing the possibility of conflict. She views communication as conflict resolution, rather than some workers who fear that it will increase the risk of conflict. Lang tries to be flexible in working out issues with her clients, but knows that she cannot afford to get angry at the employment agency staff, or they won't give her good jobs. She can sometimes tell just by observing her client's facial expression and attitude whether she will be willing to make any allowances towards resolving an issue. When Xiao and Xiang have difficult work situations, they take time out to actively plan how to resolve them by approaching the other people involved. Even if their plans do not succeed, they can feel that they tried their best, and that the problem lies with the other parties who have been made aware of their opinions.

Although Lang is flexible, she is not willing to make all the concessions, and when wronged, she will defend her dignity and her reputation. Once a client had agreed to sign a month-long contract with her, but in reality had only wanted a domestic worker for a few days during the holidays at a cheap rate. Lang told how her client tried to get out of signing the contract by laying a trap for her. The client put multiple credit cards and money in the clothes to be washed, but Lang fortunately refused to touch them and had the client's elderly father-in-law take them out and count them. Lang recounted what happened later on when she asked the client to sign the contract:

She (the client) said "Ok, I'll give the agency a call." She dialed the number for the agency and then she said it like this, she said, "the first day [Lang worked] my family lost 300 RMB and two bankcards." That's what she said. On hearing this, my heart just clenched for a bit and then started [to beat] again. Fortunately the clothes were the ones that the elderly man had gone through. If he had not gone through them [first], I would really have been jumping into the Yellow River and wouldn't have been able to prove myself right...When she was on the phone, the elderly man also heard what she said. As he was listening he yelled at his daughter-in-law, "You beast, how can you say this sort of thing, you can't just slander people like this." That's what the old man said. Since we all have a phone I dialed 110 (the number for the police), and when the old man heard me, he suddenly knelt down in front of me.

He begged Lang on his knees not to call the police, because it would ruin his reputation. Lang had been fully prepared to call the police, and brushed off his attempt to bribe her to keep her from calling them. She said that she had been framed and that this had hurt her lifelong reputation which no amount of money could buy back. This was one of the

very few times in which one of my informants was able to reverse her relations of power, and only by speaking out. Although rare, this account illustrates the power of a worker's assertion of her humanity and dignity in the face of her dehumanizing treatment.

SILENCE AND RESISTANCE CASE STUDY

Su's Case Study

Whereas the first four domestic workers' actions lie at either end of the spectrum of action, Su's actions fall somewhere in the middle. This final extended case study demonstrates the complexity of public and private struggles that migrant women face, and how poverty, and a lack of resources and support can make obstacles seem daunting and even unsurpassable. On the spectrum of action, some women clearly follow multiple strategies to deal with hardship and subordination, and in the pursuit of a better life. Su's life, as she recounted over time through multiple interviews and from what I observed when visiting her in the countryside, has been a series of struggles. She has alternately resisted and adapted to various difficult situations, but overall has had little success in achieving the elusive happiness and control over her life that she seeks. Although many of her narratives center on her work, her thoughts have continuously returned to her past and the very serious problems she has in her private life. Focusing exclusively on her workplace accounts would be akin to considering the tip of an iceberg while disregarding its foundation, the hidden history that shapes and motivates her actions. Su demonstrates a fighting spirit and a willingness to pour all her efforts into improving her life for herself, her parents and her family, but structural conditions and threats of subordination, instability and violence profoundly affect her psychologically and undermine her efforts to direct her life.

Neglect and Privation within Familial Relations

When Su was young, she was subjected to her parents' constant fighting. She said that her mother frequently picked on her father, and that Su's education set off many fights between them. Su's mother and maternal grandmother were uneducated and placed little value on education, whereas her father was highly educated for his time, being a high

school graduate, and supported Su's schooling. Her mother, who was always worried about money, was against paying for her education. Su wanted to remain a top student, but was unwillingly pulled out of school by her mother to help with farming and chores, and she started falling behind. Still strongly desirous of continuing her education, at age nine or ten Su asked her father to advocate her cause by asking the government for a partial tuition waiver. It is unclear whether her father went through with this, but by the end of elementary school she was forced to quit. Su, like many domestic workers, associates education with gaining higher *suzhi* (quality), economic and social mobility and better opportunities. She hated her mother for making her drop out, a move which effectively limited her life path. One theme that recurs in Su's narratives, are the lost opportunities that she wanted to pursue, which would have provided a stable, positive environment and education or skills, but which were taken from her by those closest to her.

For Su, experiences of caring and nurturing and their absence, in the form of neglect, deprivation and dehumanization, are very important. Her childhood is marked by memories of her mother depriving her and her sister of nutritious food, and giving away the family's extra money and even gifts to her natal family.

Whenever there was something good to eat, my mother was loath to part with it. She would think about her own brothers and sisters. We were her children, but she was not concerned enough about us. If we got something like some sesame oil, she would bring it to her parents' home. Since my grandparents were very capable, they were well off, but my mother still favored them regardless of this fact. When we were very young, we needed nourishment. We needed it for our bodies and intelligence to develop. Mother would fry some rice, some white rice that relatives gave us. She'd bring it to grandfather and if he did not want it, she'd give it to us. Whatever was leftover and uneaten, that's what we would get. She wasn't willing to put much oil on it. It was warm on the outside and still cold on the inside, she didn't heat it through. It wasn't good to eat.

Her mother's treatment conveys a clear message of Su's lower value. In her description, even the leftover rice was neglected; carelessly prepared without much thought. It is possible that because her mother "did not act like a real mother," Su is even more determined to be a good mother to her own children and work so that they can have a good education.

As mentioned previously, Su used to feel upset because she was denied the more expensive and nutritious food that she prepared for her employers. In those accounts,

she usually also mentioned her own need for nutrition, which one can now understand in the context of her malnourished childhood. Although she professed that she understood and accepted that employers would not spend extra money on her food, her descriptions still suggest that the deprivation causes her to feel undervalued and dehumanized. The account of the dog which ate spareribs while she was offered leftovers, most clearly ties together her association between denial of desirable food and dehumanization.

I submit that Su's childhood deprivations altered her tactic for dealing with subordination by the dog's employer. She was so sensitized by her experiences of deprivation at the hands of her mother, that the way her employer treated her and the spoiled dog (and the way she was expected to treat the dog) likely seemed analogous to how her mother deprived her and spoiled her natal family. Her sensitivity and hurt, accompanied by her acute moral dissonance and sharpened socio-political consciousness, fueled her anger to the point that she killed the dog.

Perhaps because of this past, Su responds very positively to being treated well or "like a member of the family." She frequently speaks of her first job with a *nainai* (grandmother). This *nainai* nurtured her, giving her time and encouragement to study. However, she had to leave this job because of her husband's constant calling and harassment, and one of her greatest regrets (besides marrying her husband) was not staying with *nainai* into her old age. Su also found a job with a Taiwanese family where she was treated very well by the mother, but again lost this job due to her husband's harassment. While working in the household where the daughter constantly picked on her because of her high wages, Su valued her relationship with the elderly grandfather, and seemed to enjoy their mutual appreciation,

I'm very moved, I feel the same way about him that I feel about members of my family. When I wash his feet, I say "yeye (grandfather), soak for a bit longer." Then I give him a massage. This yeye is really satisfied with me.

These relationships may also be more valuable for her because she does not receive love or appreciation from her own husband or his family who surround her in her village. Returning to the theme of food and caring, Su talks about how touched she is by the yeye because he cared about her nutrition and secretly gave her food. He said to her, "Child, you are still young, you should take care of your health. Drink some yogurt. When my daughter isn't here, I'll order another bottle of yogurt."

One bottle was 2.1 RMB, 30 bottles is 60-70 RMB. He thought about how it's not easy being a *baomu* (maid) in someone's home, having to manage what one should eat and how one should take care of things. He was a cadre who retired with special honors, so his thinking was very fair-minded. Because of this he ordered bottles of yogurt for me, and helped me to get enough calcium.

Because money has always been an issue for Su since she was young, the monetary value of a gift is important to her, as well as the intent. Compared to other workers, she dwells on gifts of food with particular detail and attention to cost. She seems to view spending money as a sign of caring. When relatives or friends are sick, she tries to send some money to ease their troubles.

This section has demonstrated how one particular issue from one's past can affect one's attitudes and reactions to similar situations in the present. As previously mentioned, many domestic workers view food-related treatment like eating separately or not getting enough to eat as a form of group-based discrimination. Su would agree with the symbolic importance of food, but because of her past, this treatment assumes particular significance. It is probable that Su was so moved by *yeye's* gifts of food because of her past experiences, and that her appreciation of how he treated her was a significant factor in her decision to remain in a situation in which his daughter continued to pick on her. Instead of leaving, resisting or speaking out, Su copes with subordination and tries to move people emotionally. When I visited her, she took great care in offering me special food, and telling me the lengths she went to obtain it, which can be interpreted as respect and care for me, or as eagerness to move me emotionally through food.

During Su's youth, she and her father frequently experienced injustice, which left her feeling powerless. As a child she watched her father put up with her mother's bullying:

When I heard my mother and father fighting, it was like I was at a loss for what to do, I was paralyzed. They really fought too much. My mother really looked down on my father. When she was young she really treated my father and my family badly. [It was our] lot to be doomed by heaven.

Father and mother were always angry and fighting. They fought until I was grown up and could understand things. Once when my father and mother were fighting, I really hated my mother and hit her. My mother fought with my father, yelled at him, rained curses down on him. It was unacceptable, I was outraged by the injustice, and felt that my father was really pitiable. The whole day long he put up with her anger.

Her life has been marked by instability, disappointment and discord with those who are supposed to support and protect her. She found her mother's behavior unacceptable and unjust but generally remained a bystander, possibly feeling powerless to intervene, as suggested by her comment on their "lot to be doomed."

She recounts one particularly painful incident that still leaves her feeling angry:

My father's neighbor fought with him once. My father is very *laoshi* (honest) and won't raise a hand to anyone. It's because my father is an educated person, and he thinks that if something happens you should talk about it. Use your mouth, not hitting to resolve things. The neighbor's piglet had died a few days ago and he accused my father of hitting it. He indiscriminately came to our home and beat my father. My grandmother was sitting on the ground crying her heart out. When he beat my father, his clothes were all torn and there was a lot of blood. He put up with his anger. This really left a deep impression on me, and if in my lifetime I don't get an opportunity, I won't bring it up. But if I have the opportunity, I'd definitely get revenge.

This memory may strike Su deeply because of how it has contributed to her decision to marry, and because her father's victimization parallels her present position. She generally admires her father as a sort of role model and recognizes that in the case of conflict he takes the higher moral ground, which she feels that she often takes at work. Just as she was mostly a helpless observer when her father unjustly put up with others' anger, Su is forced to put up with her husband's frequent anger and violence. Her father's example could be interpreted as a lesson that a moral person can choose to tolerate mistreatment and still never experience justice. She mentioned being doomed to a certain fate, which suggests a feeling of helplessness and inability to change outcomes. Although Su wants to escape from her marriage, she feels trapped. For Su, her lack of power means that she has little choice but to submit to her husband, and she too can never attain justice: "China has no justice, I'm always battling but never have a chance to win."

Just as Su's father has been bullied, she too was bullied as a young girl by two sisters who made her carry both their backpacks to school in addition to her own. From Su's descriptions, one can conclude that her family was in a socially vulnerable position in the village; they did not have the wealth, social capital or manpower to protect themselves. Su's choice in marriage led directly from the desire to protect her family from bullying. Her future husband was one of six brothers, and therefore no one would bother them or anyone they protected. Men are assumed to possess social power, likely

because of their physical strength and potential for violence, as well as their social status. Marriage was her form of social insurance, and although her parents were against the marriage, being freed from bullying was more important to her. Unfortunately her husband turned out to be controlling, violent, and mean.

The narratives revolving around her husband show how Su alternates between hope and despair, caring and anger and resentment, but ultimately feels a loss of control over her life's path. Each time he treated her badly, she still hoped that he would change, but he attempted to control her and their relationship from the start. Once when Su left for Beijing after he was abusive, she refused to go back and messaged him to not to come looking for her or send anyone to find her. She stayed out for two months but couldn't find much work. He finally came out to bring her back to the village. After about two days they argued again and he hit her hard on the ear. When she started making motions as though she were going to leave, he said:

“you don't need to think about that. If today you step out this door, then don't think about coming back.” His words were so overbearing. He saw me getting my things together and threw them out...he said “hurry up and get your things and scram”...I didn't know where to bring the children, how could I live, survive, I had no money, no nothing.

Despite his threats, Su could no longer tolerate his abusiveness so left for Beijing again: “I would say that I'm someone who, throughout my life, has had the worst difficulties.” This time she said she was willing to do anything for work. She hoped to take her eldest child with her and try to find an elderly employer who'd be willing to also have a child around. This one account reflects how Su resists and defies her husband's violence by leaving her home and by thinking of alternative strategies like taking a child with her. She takes a stand for herself and her dignity, despite the possible negative repercussions. However, she is always drawn back by her children. She fears leaving him for good or getting a divorce, so her work and the length of time she remains in a job is mostly dictated by her relationship with her husband. Although working in Beijing means that she is safe from violence, she still suffers from worry and depression, and has contemplated suicide.

Su's experiences demonstrate one of the ways that unhappy marriages and family relationships initiate and impact migration for domestic workers. The one strategy that Su likely learned during her first domestic work job, that one has the power to move people, did not work on her husband. Su tries to move him emotionally through her

dedication to the family, but finally admits that he is immovable. Workers may share Su's other characteristics that she derived from her life experiences, such as feeling helpless, and fated to endure injustice and a hard life. Workers who see themselves as socially vulnerable may make less-than-desirable compromises or alliances in pursuit of safety or stability.

Subordination in the Workplace

Su's workplace issues are generally more manageable than those at home because she can quit and she has some power to influence others at work. When Su first migrated to Beijing, she knew little about being a domestic worker for an urban family. Before she left after being fired from her first job, she rescued her elderly employer who fell in the snowy courtyard. Carrying her on her back without a coat and wearing one slipper, during the wintertime, she found a taxi and brought her employer to the hospital, then offered to stay and take care of her without wages. The daughter and her mother were so touched that they rehired Su, who was treated virtually like a member of the family. Su says that the lady did not pick on her faults since she had moved her emotionally. This became her strategy for improving her situation in an employer's home. In a good family, she would like to make herself irreplaceable: "I expend effort to let your family feel that it would be your loss if you don't keep me on. If I accomplish my goal, when you look for a replacement, you'll be thinking about me even more."

Her actions in response to subordination at work range from deliberate silence to deference or hidden resistance, to working her hardest to touch her employers emotionally. If a work situation is not tolerable, such as if the family is both of low *suzhi* and immovable, she leaves, but stays if it is tolerable. She said that one should try to stay in a job, because there is always someone else who would be willing to do it. Sometimes in difficult situations Su resorts to silence, because she knows that the family would not tolerate her suggestions. Su describes the menial work she does with the family whose adult daughter mistreats her because of her higher wages:

She's (the grandmother) like a vegetable. To give her water you have to inject it into her abdomen. And then if her stool doesn't come out, I have to massage her stomach and then give her an enema. I work hard and put up with criticism for the sake of earning money, for my children's living expenses. But it seems I still cannot touch them (all the members of employer's family) emotionally, just because of that extra 500 RMB.

Since Su does this work without complaint but still cannot move the daughter, she keeps her opinions to herself. She has tried over a period of time to move the daughter, and despite failure has occasionally felt hopeful, as seen in the following account. This may be one reason why domestic workers will stay for months with a family where they are treated well by some members, but not all. If some treat them well, then the workers can hope to improve their situation by moving the remaining family members.

During Chinese New Year's eve, Su had kept the invalid grandmother company while the rest of the family went out for dinner. Su was initially touched when they came back from the restaurant with ten leftover dishes and said she could have some. But then the daughter held back all the expensive dishes like shrimp and meat and gave her leftovers of the two cheapest and most common vegetable dishes:

There's no way they'd give you something good to eat. They really discriminate against people, like us rural people who come out to work. I'd already eaten with grandmother, but [it was as though they expected that] I would wait for their leftovers. It was really a loss of face. My eyes filled with tears, and I had to go to the bathroom to wash my face. I was thinking that I've given them so much emotionally, and this is how their family treats me.

Again, Su remains silent at this food-related affront, which is a personal loss of face and reinforces her socio-political awareness of how migrants are treated. Her actions suggest she thinks there is little to gain from voicing her feelings to an employer. Instead of just thinking about one's feelings, one should consider the possible gains from deference and remaining silent: "When work isn't going smoothly, then you should think from what angle to view it." Su once waited over an hour in the cold for an hourly job. She did not say anything when the client arrived late, but just did her work and then received a 50 RMB tip. "If you put in effort, you will be rewarded. If there's no reward, then maybe I'll think that I didn't do well enough." The onus is on her to perform well, and in a way that pleases the client. Su mentioned one hourly client who offered her oolong tea and she refused, saying that the tea is too expensive. After the client said that she offers it to all their workers, Su replied, "isn't it a waste"? The client replied, "we are equals." This anecdote shows that Su uses polite deference, as many other domestic workers do. Because deference is expected, a worker should protest politely when treated with particular consideration. This goes beyond the common Chinese practice of a guest politely refusing an offer of tea, because Su suggests that the tea is too expensive to spend on someone like her. In offering tea to all my interviewees, I often

heard similar refusals; that plain water is good enough for these workers. This deference can also be used to cope with undesirable situations.

Su worked for one household where she got along with everyone except for the 30 year-old grandson who was a taxi driver and lacked *suzhi*. One day he asked her to hold the pan of water while he washed his feet, a task which she felt was only appropriate for children or the elderly. She ignored him the first time, feeling that it would cause her to lose face, but when he asked her again, she reluctantly did it. A few days later when asked again, she hid her discomfort and using a respectful form of address, attempted to dissuade him, “older brother, I do it for grandmother but you are young, it’s better that you exercise a bit and do it yourself.” He replied, “If you are willing to work in our home, then do it, or else scram!” As Su prepared to leave, the grandson’s wife’s father gave her 500 RMB, an extra month’s wages. Su reassured herself, “If I lose this job, it’s not because I stirred up trouble, it’s because the family doesn’t get along and isn’t happy.” In this case her deferent refusal backfired, but presumably because she did not react badly, and because the father also thought his son-in-law’s behavior was unacceptable, she was rewarded. Su felt indignant at the grandson’s behavior, but also takes comfort in the fact that she did her job well without reacting badly. It is not important to show how she actually feels, what is important is what the employers see, therefore Su regulates herself. This is evident in her dog abuse story where Su hid both her anger and the abuse. Instead she appeared to be an obedient and agreeable worker. These are examples of how many workers deal with subordination. They perceive their space for action as limited to resisting with deference, appearing to conform, or leaving on as good terms as possible.

To conclude, one question that arises in Su’s case, as well as others, is why would Su have these different strategies for her work and personal lives? It may be that even though Su lives in intimate contact with the employing family, her service role affords her a degree of anonymity. She is expected to serve the family, but has the space to hide her private thoughts and feelings, and she can afford to leave if necessary. Her job also offers a legitimate refuge away from her husband. In her marriage everything is personal; she is invested in her family, and cannot afford to permanently leave. She cannot always pretend to be unaffected by how her husband treats and controls her, which is also public knowledge to her fellow villagers. Having unsuccessfully tried emotionally moving her husband, Su can only respond piecemeal to each affront to her dignity, and to try to stand up for herself knowing what the result will be. Taking

Bandura's concepts of self-efficacy and mastery into account, Su's inability to win the battles with her husband leaves her with a low sense of self-efficacy and a feeling of hopelessness, which contributes to her thoughts of suicide. She is able to have a bit more control, power and a higher sense of self-efficacy in the workplace because she can affect her employers' contentment and feelings about her. In a sense, she is able to find more happiness there than with her husband at home. However, unlike Xiang and Xiao, she does not have the satisfaction of speaking out against injustice and openly defending her dignity in the workplace.

For the most part, although Su recognizes that she has experienced injustice and maltreatment throughout her life, she does not expect to be able to take revenge or succeed in advocating for herself. Nonetheless, she makes one of the largest sacrifices possible to protect her parents from a similar fate, in sacrificing her own happiness to stay with her husband. Her experiences have taught her that if she is in an unjust situation with no way out, that she must either try to please the person with power and hope that they will be kind to her or submit. She is the one who has needed to make the effort to change others, and has been unable to rely on others to always treat her well.

Su is a young woman who has had ambitions, who wishes to be independent and who longs for love, appreciation and a safe and stable environment. Because of her husband's control over her, she is unable to follow any dreams of her own. Although she serves others in the workplace, she is expected to be the most subservient at home. At home is where she longs to be recognized for who she is as a wife and mother, but is instead dehumanized. She receives little to no appreciation for her efforts, and is under a degree of surveillance that surpasses what she has experienced at work. She can only fulfill herself in two ways, through her children and through positive relationships at work. This is why she is more responsive and appreciative of good relations with her employers. When I spoke to her most recently, she was again with her husband and children in the village, making plans to move with him to Shanghai. She would have to sacrifice her work in order to be available to take the children to and from school, so would just be a stay-at-home mother and wife. Although she was sure before that she would never return to the village and her husband, she did.

Violence is about control and power, and Su is reminded throughout her life that she has very little of either. She does not have enough control, power or resources to pursue coherent and linear goals in either the workplace or her hometown, so instead resorts to

a different strategy. If one has no social power to protect oneself, then one must use other methods. Su tries to create alliances and to get people to be emotionally invested in her so that they will help her (which after my visit to her hometown included, to my great surprise, asking me to raise one of her sons). If one does not have money or power, one can only do this by trying one's hardest, and to show one's intentions through action, which is both what Su did in the workplace and what she tried to do again and again to change her husband and improve their relationship.

DOMESTIC WORKERS MOVING TOWARDS VOICE

In this section I shift to a discussion about the struggles and achievements of the few domestic workers who speak out, and looking to the future, reflect upon the need for workers' individual and collective voice, and activism. I compare their struggles with those of other exemplary women who have suffered multiple oppressions, and who have served as a voice for those who share their predicament.

Audre Lorde evokes one of the most common and human of dilemmas, that domestic workers also face—of being silent out of fear, yet still being fearful while silent:

The transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger...For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own need for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.¹⁹⁶

This quote recalls the discomfort of the “smiling face” and how workers can oppress themselves with their silence. To overcome their fear and speak can truly be an act of self-revelation, which is both psychologically empowering and liberating.

To understand the struggles of female migrant domestic workers, one can draw upon the wealth of literature and testimonies from other groups that struggle with oppression, such as in Black feminist literature. Despite considerable differences, migrant women also share Black women's historical struggles with servitude, and the multiple oppressions related to identity, class and ideology. Patricia Hill Collins writes about the inspirational figure of Sojourner Truth, who developed a critical social theoretical perspective born from her experiences of migration and boundary-crossing of many

¹⁹⁶ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, CA Crossing Press, 1984/1997), 42-44.

“outsider-within locations.”¹⁹⁷ Gains in workers’ socio-political consciousness are stimulated precisely by their experiences of being out of place. Within a patriarchal society, where knowledge and power are appropriated and perpetuated by their employers, wealthy urban citizens, and the state, workers’ consciousness is stirred up by the dissonance of their experiences as women, poor migrants, and informal workers inside others’ homes. Collins’ characterization of Sojourner Truth aptly illustrates the contrast between the two groups of domestic workers that I have studied in this dissertation: “Sojourner Truth saw her intellectual and political task not as one of fitting into existing power relations but as one of confronting injustice—to speak the truth.”¹⁹⁸ Most domestics believe that they must fit into existing power relations, and that the truth is not theirs to speak. Like Sojourner Truth, a few of the workers I have written about such as Xiang, have acquired an organic critical consciousness that arose through their experiences, and are willing to use it to fight for others. Those who identify themselves as standing up for others who suffer injustice, possess a similar moral and political lens to Sojourner Truth’s, although less fully actualized.

As a group, migrant workers and Chinese rural migrants in general have two main and concurrent social challenges. One is to resist oppression and press for social change individually as well as collectively; the other is to reshape their group identity in the public consciousness. Migrants need more voices to contest the hubbub of images of the marginalized, voiceless, exploited, and backward migrant worker by grounding their identity in their unique strengths, history, origins, experiences and “outsider-within” perspectives. Critically conscious domestic workers must also challenge stereotypes about maids and push for a revaluation of domestic work. This increased public visibility and demand for respect will in turn change practices of the dominant as they too are made politically conscious.

It is not sufficient to expect rights and social change; groups will first need to demand rights and actively push for social change. The state has been trying to address income and other inequalities, although not only because it is just, but because the discontent of the underclass threatens social stability. Chunhua Yang writes:

¹⁹⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, “Searching for Sojourner Truth: Towards an Epistemology of Empowerment,” in *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 230. Outsider-within refers to marginalized people who can gain knowledge about multiple social locations, including the “insider” group with which they interact, but from which they are still excluded.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

Many migrant workers have long been on the margins of the city. The city does not accept them, to the extent that they are overlooked, experience discrimination and injury; they cannot enter urban society, nor enjoy their deserved rights...[Over time this leads] up to the migrant workers' feelings of estrangement and lack of responsibility towards that which urban society usually holds dear. If this problem is not resolved well, it can turn into a significant hidden danger for social stability.¹⁹⁹

Rather, their feelings of marginalization and anger can provide fertile ground for change. We are reminded by Collins, who refers to June Jordan's work, that the energy fueling the struggle for justice should not be diminished or lost within the politics of identity; that rage can generate an effective language of justice which categorizes right and wrong.²⁰⁰ Subordination can trigger feelings of outrage and anger which can then be shared in grouptalk, developing a language through which workers can characterize injustice among the migrant community, of "bad" employers, "suffering loss" and of oppression.

Since domestic workers who resist and speak out do so as individuals, I have mostly discussed individual voice. But, there is another form of voice which occurs for the most part out of earshot of employers and agency staff. Chinese domestic workers do not have access to Freirean style groups, but when they come together and have some measure of privacy, they have the opportunity to engage in what I call grouptalk, which is a collective discussion about the issues that troubles them. Grouptalk shifts away from social chitchat towards the political, and is therefore a potential source of organic and collective critical consciousness-building. I observed this dynamic in my focus groups when workers' discussions would revert to similar patterns of complaint. When they are alone with their colleagues, workers have the opportunity to speak out, to express their unhappiness and sense of oppression, and to begin to engage in social critique. Lang referred to this:

We've all experienced it, if I haven't run into it, since there are so many of us, if you haven't experienced it then she has. You only need one person to have encountered a situation and then come back and talk about it, and then you gain that experience.

There are really some of us who have called 110 (the police)...Those of us who do hourly work spend all day together, if yesterday she has encountered

¹⁹⁹ Chunhua Yang, "'Guanyu xinshengdai nongmingong wenti de sikao' (Reflecting on the New Generation Migrant Workers' Issues)" *Nongye Jingji Wenti (Agricultural Economy Issues)*, no. 4 (2010): 83.

²⁰⁰ Collins, "Searching for Sojourner Truth: Towards an Epistemology of Empowerment," 250.

something, then we all learn about it, we go to the agency to talk...If yesterday she called 110, then why wouldn't we be able to call 110...we boost each other's courage.

Such discussions can contribute to a sense of solidarity and group identity which situates employers as an oppositional group that shares neither their social position nor interests. Grouptalk can stimulate socio-political awareness, and through success stories, could also encourage others to stand up for themselves. However, it has yet to be seen how organically arising individual critical consciousness can develop into collective action.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have examined multiple factors that illuminate workers' actions and their underlying history and logic. First of all, their actions are influenced by how they see themselves. How they see themselves encompasses their identities as women and migrant domestic workers, their values and motivations, and how they view their self-efficacy and capacity to resist. How one sees oneself is highly social and relational, since one exists and acts in relation (or opposition) to others, and even personal values such as standing up for justice take on meaning only in a social context. A woman's self-identity and moral values for instance, can affect the latitude of actions she sees as acceptable in particular circumstances. For example, a woman like Lang who places a high value on dignity and justice, may identify herself as someone who will resist injustice, and believe she is justified in calling the police to address a serious insult to her dignity or reputation. Others who possess the restrained, hard-working Chinese migrant ethical identity, might decide to exert self-control and avoid "causing trouble," and instead try to minimize losses and quickly find a new job.

I cannot overstate the influence of people's past experiences, the environment in which they grew up and operated on a daily basis, and the prevailing social norms and expectations to which they were exposed. Significant experiences such as abuse or deprivation during one's youth likely shape how one views and approaches similar situations as an adult and in the workplace, so I have drawn links between responses to familial subordination and subordination in the workplace. When they were young, the women may have adopted ethical norms such as filial piety, which in turn influenced them to accept decisions that they did not condone and which were not in their interests,

such as an arranged marriage. Although the workplace is a different environment, workers may still have a similar mindset about the degree of control they feel they have over their decisions and life. They may have spent their lives being told to obey their parents, teachers, and finally their employers. Nonetheless, what is important is not necessarily how dire their situation is, but how they perceive their space for action within that situation. The space for action for people like Su, who because of their experiences now believe they cannot successfully challenge their subordination, can only accommodate non-transformative tactics of deference and pleasing those who subordinate them. Su's belief that she can never attain justice, which is a direct result of her past failures to do so, also determines that her tactics for countering subordination will never go beyond coping or exit.

I have observed that migration and financial independence do not necessarily correlate with open expression of one's interests and feelings, as many workers have come out on their own, have managed hardships and developed resilience over time but are silenced in the workplace. Generally, when an individual feels insecure and knows that there is little space to act as she wishes, it is common to default to a safer, more silent state. Many people do not think about "overthrow[ing] or transform[ing] a system of domination," but worry about *couhe*, just making do or getting by on a daily basis. Scott similarly claims that much of hidden peasant resistance is undertaken as a strategy in order to survive.²⁰¹ Workers usually feel that they have little choice but to follow orders and keep their opinions to themselves, even if they are upset about how they are treated. They view the authoritative employer as being able to dictate the confines of their actions.

When addressing the majority of workers who remain silenced, it is important to consider the link between voice, power, and relationships. One can infer from Carol Gilligan's and others' work on women's voice and development that women are not so much silent because they do not know what they want to do, but because giving voice conflicts with how they think they should act, particularly in connection to relationships. She noted in her interviews that:

many women in fact did know what they wanted to do and also what they thought would be the best thing to do in what often were painful and difficult situations. But many women feared that others would condemn or hurt them if they spoke, that others would not listen or understand, that speaking would

²⁰¹ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*: 301.

only lead to further confusion, that it was better to appear “selfless,” to give up their voices and keep the peace.²⁰²

In the workplace, women are also silenced because of their fear of conflict, condemnation, and repercussions. It is also disrespectful and awkward to speak of the employer’s wrongdoing, especially since she likely acted in the belief that her behavior was acceptable and that she could get away with it. Within personal relationships, particularly involving dominant or abusive husbands, it is even easier to envision why women would decide to remain silent and “selfless.” Belenky and her colleagues observed that:

A woman who holds the view that one advances alone at the expense of others will feel forced to choose between herself and others (Gilligan 1982/1993). She can either assert herself and cause harm to others or she can stand in the background curtailing her own development so her children and husband can prosper. In contrast, those like Harriet Jacobs who assume they can advance themselves while lifting up others have a way of thinking that can empower everyone in the relationship (Debold, Wilson, and Malave, 1993).²⁰³

This idea may be foundational in explaining why some women choose to sacrifice themselves rather than pursuing their right to dignity and development. Relational responsibilities for women are seen to require varying degrees of self-sacrifice, such as in the cases discussed in the last chapter where women agreed to arranged marriages or other undesirable situations because of their perceived responsibilities towards their natal families. When they have continually sacrificed their interests in the past, they lack the mastery experiences to help them counter subordination in the workplace.

When deliberating about a situation, workers will draw upon their values and motives, past successes and failures, and existing understandings which include their socio-political consciousness. Socio-political consciousness, particularly arising from lived knowledge of one’s and one’s colleagues’ subordination, offers a lens through which workers can view life’s difficulties as they relate to gender and social hierarchy, resources, and power relations. It is important precisely because it indicates that the workers focus on more than an “individual event in all its particularity.” They are able to see the larger significance of the event, and the forces that subordinate and limit them.²⁰⁴ Socio-political consciousness provides a context for workers to see that they

²⁰² Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982/2003), x.

²⁰³ Belenky, *A Tradition That Has No Name*: 29.

²⁰⁴ Frye, “The Politics of Reality: Oppression”.

themselves have not caused their poor treatment, but that they are treated thus because of their lowly status. This knowledge redefines an action or condition as unjust, and hence legitimizes workers' feelings of anger and being wronged, which can then act as an impetus for them to protect themselves. Those who stand up for themselves, particularly individuals like Xiang who have been doing so consistently and over a long period of time, find it possible to fulfill multiple roles well without sacrificing their dignity. There is a clear alignment between their perceived greater space for action, their sense of being capable of bringing about positive change, and their emphasis on standing up for themselves and not letting others take advantage of them.

However, revisiting the connection between one's perceived capabilities, the power of one's mind and action, Belenky and her colleagues suggest that "if subordinates accept the idea that they cannot and should not develop the power of their minds, they are likely to remain powerless at the hands of the superordinates."²⁰⁵ If workers think their only power lies in building emotional connections through their efforts, but not in learning, speaking and negotiating, they may lack the confidence and sense of self-efficacy to attempt to deal with the dominant in other ways. Another factor that could impact domestic workers' actions relates to their understandings derived from public discussions about their treatment, rights and behavior. Mason et al. suggest that empowerment does not just come from improving individual capabilities, but from beliefs and norms that give certain members greater rights to exercise power. Empowerment therefore also relates to "the emergence of new beliefs about their *right* to exercise these capabilities and take advantage of opportunities in their community."²⁰⁶ Many workers may believe that they cannot do anything to combat employer discrimination or exploitation because it is widely known that employers can take advantage of vulnerable workers. They are also influenced by what they see as the existing space for action within society, the community, and the situation in which they are immersed. Domestic workers therefore need to act collectively, to move beyond grouptalk to push for change, to employ their "outsider-within" perspective to foster a more collective socio-political consciousness, and to encourage others to communicate, negotiate, and pursue justice when wronged. It is always possible for women to develop their strategies, to begin to resist, to try to set wrongs right, and to come to voice.

²⁰⁵ Belenky, *A Tradition That Has No Name*: 8.

²⁰⁶ Karen Oppenheim Mason, "Measuring Women's Empowerment: Learning from Cross-National Research," in *Measuring Empowerment: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Deepa Narayan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 90.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

PART I INTRODUCTION

This dissertation responds to a pervasive and very human predicament—when those with power mistreat, exploit or discriminate against those who are their subordinates. I have investigated key questions about Chinese domestic workers' subordination. How do socio-cultural, socio-political and psychological factors influence how Chinese female domestic workers understand and address subordination? Why do a small minority of domestic workers advocate for themselves, whereas the majority remain silent or comply with subordination? I have demonstrated that there are no simple answers, for human action is inherently complex. To attribute domestic workers' silent compliance to their lack of social and economic power in the workplace, is not sufficient. One should take into account how power is effective in eliciting their compliance and even cooperation, as well as the diverse forms of motivation that shape their inner determination of action. I have argued that to illuminate how workers think about and respond to inequality and subordination, one must consider a wide range of socio-political, socio-cultural and psychological factors. These factors are integral to the formation and practice of domestic workers' identities, moralities, responsibilities and understandings about power, which collectively in turn tend to discourage workers from acting against the norm and advocating for themselves.

My main goal has been to develop a holistic and interdisciplinary analytical approach to explain the factors that engender workers' reactions to subordination, and for the attendant analysis to be used to support their empowerment. I also hope to contribute to studies on power and to further the integration of questions of morality and power into social science analysis. My approach and objectives stand apart from those presented in the domestic worker and migrant literature. My approach emphasizes the importance of psychology, cognition, consciousness, and morality in analyzing individualized motives and power relations. I also draw conclusions about the migrant women's tendencies as individuals as well as domestic workers, by comparing their actions in different contexts and over time. As there are already more qualified advocates supporting domestic workers by advocating for improved policy and

legislation, or who are engaged in trainings through NGO activities, I hope my research, when published, will offer both theoretical and practical insights to those working at the grassroots, including domestic workers, who could support others in cultivating a critical consciousness and initiating change.

The next few paragraphs further address the distinctive elements of my approach and its significance. To start, I have found it necessary to analyze the underlying reasons for workers' actions at both an individual and group level. This is because in the same type of situation, some workers will resist subordination whereas others will comply. Also, some workers may act similarly, such as silently enduring poor treatment, but for different reasons. In order to understand the reasons for variation within what appears to be a homogeneous group, one should consider the factors that influence the actions of its individual members. Therefore my analysis works at three levels, the societal, relational and individual levels. I analyze how social norms, discourses and practices affect groups and individuals. I also consider what happens within individuals' relations of power. Finally, I study workers' perspectives, motives, ethical values, priorities, and self-identities, which have been shaped by dominant social norms as well as what they have learned through personal experiences and interactions with others in the countryside and the city.

In my analysis, I have situated domestic workers as social and relational beings both within society and at the level of labor relations. I define the relational aspect separately because people are concerned with how they should act towards specific others and within particular relationships, such as with their families, friends, employers, and powerful others. How workers act within labor relations should be studied within the broader context of their location within society, as well as their lives outside the workplace. Employers' subordinating power arises from multiple, overlapping socio-political discourses, norms and practices concerning poor rural women and migrant domestic workers. The effects of employers' socio-political and economic power and these dominant norms and practices should be considered both within and outside workers' labor relations. Since workers' poverty and lack of power constrains their freedom to define themselves and their life paths, they must adapt to adverse circumstances. When subsistence and their family's basic well-being are at stake, women are diverted from a focus on themselves and their rights. Multiple forms of oppression constrain their freedom to pursue equality and to think beyond the day-to-day. When workers are unable to envision a future with a modicum of stability, it is

logical that they resort to self-sacrifice in the pursuit of needed income and that they refrain from acting in ways that could further destabilize their precarious situation and bring unwelcome repercussions.

Factors including poverty, unequal power relations and social stratification, and a lack of legal protection and oversight limit the ability of workers to resist subordination. However, my particular interests center on how workers have been influenced by socio-cultural and socio-political factors, which include subordinating power; ethical norms and moral concepts; gender, class, origin, and occupation; cognitive and psychological influences; and socio-political consciousness. I argue that in conjunction with their own perspectives, these factors determine workers' responses to subordination within the above-mentioned environment of inequality. I broadly focus on three areas where workers are influenced by social structures, norms and practices, and through which they interact with others—power, morality and identity. These shape how workers are expected to respond to subordination (within labor relations), how they think they should respond (based on their ethics and morality), and what they think they can do (based on their self-identity and sense of self-efficacy). Psychological and cognitive factors are key to my analysis, because subordination can have a deleterious psychological impact on workers and on how they perceive their capacity to act, but can also engender the socio-political consciousness that precedes critical consciousness and action. I take an unusual approach in investigating how workers are psychologically and cognitively affected by subordination, and how these psychological effects and consciousness in turn affect their actions. I have shown that how women *perceive* their identity, morality, and capacity for action and resistance can affect whether they speak out or remain silent.

I have explored a large range of domestic workers' experiences of subordination and their corresponding actions. For the purpose of comparison, I divided the workers into two categories based on whether they tended to remain silent or advocated for themselves. The analysis of my interview data revealed significant differences between how my informants conceive of their social responsibilities and relations, their moral and ethical identities, and political possibilities, both as rural women, as migrant domestic workers and as individuals. In this chapter, I will underline the primary differences that have emerged between the majority of workers who remain silent and the few who can be said to have demonstrated an organic critical consciousness. The chapter is divided into four sections, including this introduction. The second section

examines the socio-cultural factors, dynamics of power, and identities which are implicated in workers' silence and compliant responses. The chapter then shifts from the actions of the majority to the transformative potential shown by the acts of a few. This third section explores the emergence of voice and its significance for those who stand up for themselves, and their distinctly different interpretations of morality, self-identity and power. In the final section I draw conclusions about the reasons why the two groups of workers act as they do.

PART II THE TERRAIN OF SILENCE

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 have explained how and why the majority of workers respond to subordination with compliance or silence. When workers indicate that they have remained silent, I have inquired into the reasons why their "public transcripts" so resemble what their employers desire. Explanations about workers' acts accommodating subordinating power and dominant norms show how blurry the boundary can be between deliberate performances of compliance and those which become habitual and partly internalized. The negotiation of their identities and values, which are both integral to their decision-making, frequently results in decisions to not resist or speak out.

Socio-Cultural Norms, Ethics and Identities

The silencing of female domestic workers occurs on multiple levels, across contexts, and over time. Women can be "silenced" by externally and internally imposed socio-cultural pressures. By studying their ascribed identities and self-identities, one can discern the particular expectations others have for them and the expectations and values they hold for themselves. Dominant and local discourses, and norms and practices, influence their self-identities and how they think they should act in relation to others. Negative aspects of their identities as poor women, rural migrants, and domestic workers also serve to delimit workers' potential for social and economic mobility and change. In particular, socio-cultural norms and identities associated with gender and domestic work promote an emphasis on caring for others and self-sacrifice.

An examination of workers' gendered life histories has demonstrated how being female within a patriarchal society can bring about multiple and lasting repercussions.

The fact of being female can affect others' expectations and behavior towards them, restrict their access to resources and opportunities, and limit their decision-making ability over major life choices such as education and marriage. Personal accounts have illustrated how patriarchal power exercised within intimate relations has deprived some women of their autonomy to the extent that they tried to commit suicide, whereas others were married against their will, or remained in unhappy marriages. However, by taking a life-history perspective, it becomes apparent that even these subordinated women are not reduced to always feeling resigned and fatalistic. Women who were abused and mistreated at home or whose lives were shaped by patriarchal expectations and prejudice still continue to struggle for a better life, whether by actively opposing their subordination, finding independence through work, or seeking psychological comfort in talking with friends and colleagues about their experiences. I have shown that women's silencing is never total, but that one should nonetheless take into account that they may still silence their own needs when making decisions, when yielding to others, and when they attempt to maintain harmonious relations at their own expense.

Past experiences can affect one's mindset and perceived capabilities. In the above-mentioned situations of mistreatment, women can come to feel disempowered and less able to make their own choices, as a result of complying with subordination. Compliance may depend on how tightly their sense of responsibility as mothers and wives is tied to the idea of self-sacrifice, and how far they are pushed in these roles. As domestic workers, the women are also aware of expectations of servitude, silence and deference, which have a lingering connection to the time of servants and slaves. These expectations, evoked through employers' looks and commands, are reinforced by the sense of continuity between women's domestic responsibilities, caretaking and self-sacrifice in their private lives, and their employment.

Domestic workers of all ages share a receptivity to ethical discourses on and practices of maternal sacrifice and familial obligation, particularly as both their familial and livelihood roles involve caring for others, negotiating personal relations, and fulfilling their responsibilities towards others. This relational morality is yet another reason why workers do not respond to subordination in clear-cut ways, and why their compliance and silence can have negative consequences such as psychological stress and feelings of oppression, yet also be conscious acts in line with their values and identities. Chinese domestic workers who do not advocate for themselves experience a conflict between their own and their family's interests, as well as in the context of their

intimate yet hierarchical work relations. Rather than acting as they may wish in response to subordination, their obligations and difficult financial situation compel them to reflect on the importance of keeping their jobs, continuing to earn money, and avoiding conflict at work. Many workers also abstain from acting as they want because they are averse to using their voice when it could cause social discomfort, and feel that it is unethical or inappropriate to challenge or embarrass their employers.

I have argued that Chinese discourses about *zuoren*, *suzhi*, familial obligation, *chi ku*, and *chi kui* have significantly influenced the ethics of my interviewees as women, migrants, and as domestic workers, as well as their hesitation to advocate for themselves. Some of the women's descriptions of their ethical identities and practices record a shift away from the urban stereotype of loud and impetuous rural women who have a heavy-handed and defensive attitude towards slight and subordination. This shift towards a gentle voice or silence and towards accommodation or *ren* (to endure)²⁰⁷ is prompted by these ethical discourses and subordination, and is also derived from their social location and experiences as rural women in urban China. The "loud, self-centered" rural woman seems to be an urban stereotype acquired once rural women find themselves held up to images of sophisticated high-*suzhi* citizens and modernity. Since they cannot achieve the same type of *suzhi* as urbanites, my informants have instead focused on transforming themselves. They believe that rural women with *suzhi* not only have more refined and gentle voices, but cultivate forethought and empathy. They spend time considering and thinking about others, and restrain their selfish impulses. Their behavior also, perhaps deliberately, serves to counter employer stereotypes about low-*suzhi*, immoral rural people. The domestic workers' practices of *suzhi*-raising involve inhibition of voice, restraint and consideration.

Zuoren (how to be an upright person), *chi ku* and *chi kui* all involve restraint of actions for different reasons. *Zuoren* is an ethical code of conduct for how these women should act as individuals and members of society by exercising self-awareness, behaving morally and correctly, and refraining from harming others. The *chi kui* (suffering loss) discourse suggests that it can be virtuous to let others win rather than trying to take advantage of them, and when perceived as a "blessing," provides a rationale for enduring loss and hardship. However, exploitation by employers still results in feelings of powerlessness or anger. *Chi ku* (bearing hardships) requires

²⁰⁷ In previous chapters, *ren* or *renshou* is how workers described their tolerating, or enduring subordination.

migrants to endure challenges in the city as part of becoming stronger and raising their *suzhi*, as well as for the sake of their families. Pride in their ability to *chi ku* is a mark of model domestic workers who are not afraid to deal with hardship and who are not afraid of dirty and demanding work. *Chi ku* is also related to their lack of power. Workers are not only expected by their employers to act morally, but the threat of punishment through lost wages, jobs or reputation can be enough to restrict their moral agency and result in pragmatic compliance or adaptation. It is often easier to conform to socially or politically ascribed roles rather than to challenge them. The consistent ethical theme is self-work. Domestic workers frequently turn inwards to change, rather than attempting to change their relations with others, or to protect their rights. Conversely, the effects of certain discourses like *suzhi* can undercut any tendency they may have had to speak out.

Because of their low status and precarious position as migrant domestic workers, employers can easily take advantage of them, and they may easily come to see their reality as unchangeable, their choices limited to coping or leaving in the case of subordination. Their ethical identities focus on their own responsibilities and conducting themselves well in relation to others, which leads them to avoid conflict when possible and to try to be “good” domestic workers. It is very difficult for these women to advocate for themselves when they are focused on self-work, on avoiding conflict with others, and on earning money within a context where they think they can only work within the “system” of domestic service and its unequal relations of power.

The Effects of Power and Subordination

I have demonstrated how subordination, no matter how subtle, can silence workers, diminish their feelings of autonomy and personal agency, and elicit compliance. This is due to the effects of power and socio-political understandings about power relations. The system within which domestics work, involves workers’ unequal power relations with their employers and the intermediary agency. Underpinning these relations and acts of subordination are socio-structural norms and understandings about power, the domestic service regime, and class and other distinctions that separate employers and workers, including the commodification of workers and their labor. Power relations alone provide sufficient motivation to remain silent and compliant, since the agency and employers dictate most of the terms and conditions of work, whether the women get work, and whether they get paid. As mentioned, workers are also influenced by ethical

and social desires to conduct themselves well towards their employers and to avoid conflict. Their actions show that they are considerably affected by subordination or the implicit threat of subordination, which is exercised at the individual level to extract work and desired behavior. Workers are subordinated in a variety of ways, such as by words and commands, looks and monitoring, substandard food and board, excessive control over workers' actions, and through deprivation, discrimination, exploitation and expectations for deferential behavior. There are two important matters to consider here, a power analysis of why workers comply when subordinated, and the silencing and psychological effects of subordination.

Muting of domestic workers' voices occurs not only when they remain with "bad" employers, but is a common characteristic of the domestic work experience. If subordination is blatant and excessive, workers are likely to find a benign excuse and leave. They are unlikely to speak out when they exit a situation, because they have learned to avoid conflict. These workers believe that they should not make trouble for others, and fear that their work and reputation would suffer if they did. If they have not previously tried to advocate for themselves, they may have a low sense of their self-efficacy in this respect. Furthermore, silence is already practiced within the workplace, since workers are often expected to keep their opinions to themselves and to follow their employers' dictates. Many of the workers do not leave right away, but stay in the hope that things will improve, in order to earn money, or because they do not want to pay the agency a fee for breaking their contract early. Also, it may be that in comparison with their own or other workers' experiences, subordination appears to be common and thus difficult or pointless to try to elude. These reasons however, do not fully explain the mechanisms of power which cause workers to yield to their employers' demands rather than openly resisting.

Even if workers have only been subjected to a few suspicious looks and a few suggestive comments, the effects can be potent, particularly in a context where they are frequently made to feel the weight of employers' expectations. Employers' actions can be sufficient to direct the workers' gaze upon themselves, to ensure that they perform well in the eyes of their employers and to avert any further trouble and criticism. Logically, compliance is the easiest way to please. As workers feel ill at ease and are aware that they may be watched, they discipline themselves to fall in line with their employers' desires. They also become aware that they are expected to hide how they really feel, so they assume a smiling face. By regularly practicing self-discipline and

deference, which are reinforced by images of the ideal domestic worker, these practices can become partially internalized and normalized. In moving a worker's gaze and critique upon herself, power expunges the space for criticism and resistance.

I maintain that an effect of subordination is to remove the perception of choice. When workers are made to feel that they cannot speak out against or challenge subordination, or alter their labor relations, their compliance becomes a choiceless choice. They must simply do what is required within the system, to earn money for their families. Subordination can also lead to the practice of self-oppression, and generate psychological and cognitive conflict through double consciousness, both of which can perpetuate feelings of powerlessness. When workers silently comply with excessive or exploitative demands, the tactics of subordination have been successful. Employers have not been held accountable, and therefore have little motivation to treat workers differently. Silenced workers do not conceive of themselves as possible agents of change, and in attributing power almost exclusively to their employers, leave only the path of silence open.

PART III ORGANIC CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND VOICE

The links between socio-cultural, socio-political and psychological factors and workers' self-advocacy, as well as their distinct perspectives on power, morality and identity, have been explored principally in Chapters III, V, and VI. I claim that these workers' perspectives are very different from those of the majority, based on how their moral lens and ethics of justice interact with their socio-political consciousness, resulting in actions of organic critical consciousness.

Organic critical consciousness embodies workers' socio-political consciousness which arises unfacilitated from their experiences and knowledge of oppression, and includes their consequent actions to advocate for themselves. Most workers demonstrate some degree of socio-political awareness. When employers react to their gender, class, social status, as well as stereotypes about their occupation and rural background, workers are made aware of how they are seen, and may also become more aware of what separates them from their employers. Experiences of subordination give shape and form to workers' purported differences, solidifying the link between low-status, stigma, and their group attributes such as rurality. In order to illustrate one important

permutation of the dynamics of socio-political consciousness, I envision a spiral of power and socio-political consciousness which are linked in a pattern like a double helix. Spiraling downwards, a worker experiences increasingly more subordination, but growing in the opposite direction is the degree of her consciousness as she becomes more aware of the causes of her subordination. This is particularly relevant in the case of blatant subordination or exploitation. I have referred to examples where subordination drove workers to the point where they could no longer tolerate it and had to leave, or were pushed to the point where they felt they needed to defend their own interests. More subtle or pervasive forms of power, however, are less likely to elicit resistance, and may not even heighten workers' socio-political consciousness. Both for those who are silent and those who advocate for themselves, socio-political awareness functions as a moral lens that highlights shared injustices. Moral dissonance is part of the process of moral reasoning. Often triggered by subordination, it starts a process of judgment and reflection, whereby based on a variety of factors, workers decide how they should and can react. However, when a worker experiences moral dissonance and recognizes that something is unjust, she will not necessarily resist. A worker's moral values and standards also do not necessarily correspond with how she responds to immorality. A worker can value harmonious relationships and tend to avoid conflict, yet if she experiences a particularly immoral situation where her physical safety or autonomy are at stake, she will likely resist, and may defy socially expected behavior and upset existing power relations. Other workers like Xiang, regularly exercise their agentic muscle; they continue to advocate for themselves, regardless of whether they fail or succeed. Their orientation towards justice is strong enough to at least temporarily overcome their fears and vulnerability.

The point at which a worker gains socio-political consciousness is pivotal, because it can affect her actions in one of two opposing ways. Workers may decide to comply because they see subordination as commonplace and do not believe they can challenge it, or they could become motivated to defend their own interests because subordination is common and hence they need to protect themselves. The situation is the same, but their reaction is mediated by a variety of factors including their orientation towards the problem, the perceived possibility or space for change, and their own perceived potential to effect change. It is important to examine these factors in their responses to subordination over time, and how their experiences of subordination prior to entering domestic work affect their responses in the workplace, and vice-versa. In Xiao's case,

her few instances of workplace resistance pale in comparison to her decisions to reject her arranged marriage, drop out of school, and migrate to Beijing at age 13. It becomes apparent that she resists because she highly values her autonomy, in addition to wanting to be paid fairly, and that she has developed resilience, great independence and an increased sense of self-efficacy over time. How workers view their space for action is critical to self-advocacy, and workers like Xiao and Xiang can envision a greater imagined space in which their actions could be efficacious. In situations that they think would benefit from negotiation or activism, they act based on the idea and ideal of workers' rights.

However, socio-cultural expectations for domestics are an obstacle even for empowered workers. They cannot entirely defy the negative socio-cultural discourses about low-status and inferior domestics, because they infiltrate their everyday treatment and work. Since domestic workers are generally willing to tolerate some degree of difficulty at work before they quit, and are acutely aware of social expectations to comply and to refrain from challenging their employers, even the public voice of workers who speak out for themselves can be diminished and hesitant. However, I suggest that their frustration and anger can at times serve as fuel to galvanize them or others to act. When workers advocate for themselves, subordination has a different psychological effect. Instead of resulting in anger or distress which can turn inwards into self-oppression, the feelings of frustration and anger turn outwards and result in action.

Finally, I have found that positive aspects of workers' identities are key to their acts of negotiation or resistance. I note strong links between these workers' sense of identity and values, and their emphasis on justice, such as when they identify themselves as people who contest injustice. The workers feel that they remain true to themselves when they act to contest injustice, an act which also allows them to shed their feelings of moral dissonance and oppression. I suggest that those who align their self-identity with values that arouse strong emotion, such as maternal love or justice, are far more likely to act when the integrity of these values are threatened, even if they lack a strong sense of self-efficacy. Workers like Xiang and Lang appear to have a stronger sense of self-efficacy, perhaps both from their identity as individuals who resist injustice and their multiple experiences of standing up for themselves. They are self-reliant and know that no one else will stand up for them if they do not protect themselves first.

PART IV CONCLUSION

This dissertation has departed from other scholars' work on Chinese migrant workers and domestic workers in its multi-level approach to workers' engagement with subordination which integrates analysis of external influences with analysis of workers' perspectives and internal motivations. I have examined how social, cultural and political forces define and limit how workers can and should act, at the same time looking at their moral, psychological and power perspectives to understand how they are affected by subordination and why they decide to act as they do. Their perspectives and decisions are also critically influenced by past experiences, new experiences and learning, and evolving conceptions of the self.

In short, there are many reasons why workers think it is not appropriate or possible to negotiate, speak out or actively resist. These workers focus on pleasing and responding to their employers, and so are less likely to try to head off problems before they arise. When employers unfairly exercise power over them, workers find themselves in the uncomfortable situation of being expected to comply. They employ tactics of appeasement and try to emotionally move their employers by working hard and well. The key finding is that instead of thinking that they can change their situation, these workers change themselves. If they work harder or better, then perhaps their employers will not complain and will treat them better. If workers can no longer stand a given situation, then they leave. These tactics for dealing with their own subordination can lead to internal conflict and a struggle between their ascribed identities and self-identities, as well as feelings of unhappiness and oppression. To a large degree they accept the unequal power relationship, even if it includes varying degrees of subordination, or monitoring and control.

We must also pay attention to changing and developing moral perspectives. Su's experiences as a domestic worker led her to abandon her self-centered viewpoint in the workplace which was attuned to issues of fairness. She came to understand that employers' provision of cheaper and less nutritious food is logical and hence acceptable. It is apparent that over time and with experience, many domestic workers have turned away from using the moral lens with which they used to view their subordination. They still may experience moral dissonance and develop their socio-political consciousness, but they have come to privilege the point of view and power of their consumers. These workers have lost what "voice" they had, they have come to acknowledge their lack of

power in the workplace, and generally concede to the dominant power and desires of their employers. Other women starting as domestics who have already partially internalized and accepted the unequal power relations in the workplace and society, can manifest a lesser degree of moral dissonance and a less articulated socio-political consciousness. Under these circumstances, it is even more challenging to attain voice.

Female domestic workers are silenced in many ways, in large part by pressure that is external yet becomes internalized. Social norms and expectations for women and domestic workers, ethical norms of how to conduct themselves, and monitoring, demands or other forms of control or poor treatment combine to form an implacable weight upon these women. Ultimately they silence themselves, apprehensive of what would happen if they acted against the expectations of those who dominate them. If they choose the path of least resistance towards important and powerful others, then it is often they themselves who suffer in trying to please too many masters. Although they may resist in less obvious ways, they also engage significantly in self-sacrifice and self-silencing. They find it hard to privilege or consider themselves when more is demanded of them. These responses to workplace subordination are influenced by ethical understandings about feminine goodness, care and self-sacrifice. However, in the case of subordination, workers' practices of care and self-sacrifice are accentuated or distorted by the mediating lens of power and class. Self-discipline at work is like a parody of idealized feminine goodness, because it is not only born from expectations for careful and caring work, but from fear and apprehension, and it is imposed. It is challenging for workers to resist engaging in self-discipline and self-sacrifice, because it is reasonable to so respond to the social pressures and ethical expectations that are embedded in seemingly minor forms of routine subordination. In the terrain of silence, there is little justice and possibility of change for domestic workers.

In contrast, those who advocate for themselves still take pride in their work as mothers and domestics, but refuse to "sacrifice" themselves in the case of significant subordination. Those who speak out to authoritative others, however, are more willing to risk conflict. When despite doing their job, others threaten their dignity, health, psychological well-being, reputation or wages, it is necessary to resort to communication, negotiation and to sometimes call the police. In doing so, workers assert their self-worth, their equal value as human beings, and let their employers know that they will not accept further mistreatment. What does speaking out in and of itself accomplish? Voices of resistance have psychological, cognitive and political effects.

Voice holds meaning as the conduit through which workers express their desires and their independence from authoritative power, regardless of whether a situation is successfully resolved. The act of speaking out communicates a speaker's intent and her belief that there either is space for change or that there should be. It includes a tacit demand for recognition, for being heard and acknowledged, and also conveys moral power to the worker who protests against injustice by holding the action in question up to the light. When workers actually achieve their goals, their actions are further validated and they see themselves as more efficacious. By experiencing small successes, spaces open up for them to act autonomously. Voice is effectively a validation of the self rather than a seeking of external validation, and a critical assertion of the dignity that can be lost in performances of deference and service. When they speak out in their own interests, workers are also set free from double consciousness. Importantly, these domestic workers do not come from a position of *de jure* power, but are able to psychologically move beyond what others expect of them. Although domestics in the workplace are effectively invisible to outsiders, they make unspoken issues visible to their employers by communicating to them and hence at least momentarily restore greater equilibrium to their unequal power relations. Because society still devalues domestic work, and lacks regular and dependable mechanisms to help workers, they have come to the conclusion that they can only rely on themselves.

I suggest that workers who advocate for themselves have three distinct characteristics. They possess a particular orientation towards subordination which reflects: their perspectives as workers, the development of their moral perspectives, and their belief that they have the capacity to effect change. Their experiences as domestic workers contribute to their socio-political consciousness, as is the case for other workers. But these women think they have the capacity to try to protect their interests; a belief which then allows cognitive alternatives to arise and have a greater chance of being actualized. All workers have moral perspectives that relate to their work, but many predominantly adopt norms for ethical self-work. In contrast, the minority possess an increasingly acute moral lens and moral dissonance, and a focus on addressing injustice. The three characteristics are intertwined, for the workers need socio-political awareness and a moral lens to characterize their experiences as unjust, and they must believe that they have the capacity or potential to effect change in order to actively respond to injustice.

Reaching the point of self-advocacy also relies on the workers' perceptions about the elasticity of their space to act, how much can be negotiated, how plainly things can be said, how tightly they cling to the notion of obtaining justice for themselves, and their right to speak out despite their low social status. The women who have found their voice have developed an organic critical consciousness. This may not be a fully critical awareness of how subordination emerges from socio-political difference, but it is crucially accompanied by the belief that they can change the outcome of given situations. Since these workers know that many, if not most employers look down on them, and that some will try to take advantage of them, they believe that they need to look out for themselves. Although they understand domestic work requires a conciliatory, tolerant attitude, they do not see themselves as helpless. Instead, they actively try to find solutions to work issues, and pursue the types of domestic work which they consider to have the lowest incidences of discrimination, or which they think is the most *ziyou* (free). Those who resist domination have developed some understanding of the system which allows others to dominate them. They resist by refusing to have themselves defined as being at the bottom, a refusal which we can read as an implicit critique of the ills of capitalism and patriarchy. Their accounts suggest that they hold their own visions of human rights, workers' rights and ethics which underline their conviction that they should be treated well. They know that there are risks and costs to advocating for themselves, so are often proactive in trying to prevent situations of conflict from happening in the first place, or try to intervene as soon as conflict arises. They think that times have changed, and believe that domestic workers have rights, and that there are many other domestic work jobs available if they are dissatisfied with their current work.

At present, the majority of domestic workers continue to remain silent in the face of subordination, but over time, I suggest that their threshold for tolerating subordination will diminish and a growing number will speak out for themselves. This is contingent on an increasing rights awareness or perception of having rights or access to rights, on taking guidance from the small but increasing number of workers who advocate for themselves, and on a decreased supply of workers in respect to demand. On the other hand, a probable decline in economic growth in China may affect the demand for domestic workers, so they may have to try even harder to remain employed in a context of scarce jobs. As market changes are hard to predict, the focus should still remain on the essential dynamics of workers' relations. It remains key to examine how workers'

understandings and actions are affected by how they see themselves, their location within unequal power relations, and their space for action.

The social norms and ethics of the majority of workers are non-confrontational and focus on individual self-work. Coupled with the effects of subordination and perceived lack of power as domestic workers, this means that most workers will not advocate for themselves. The few who act upon their socio-political consciousness to counter their indignities share the same norms as others about being good mothers and domestic workers. But they feel that at a certain point they must stand up for themselves, when in their eyes, their employers' use of power becomes illegitimate. Confronted with injustice, these women simply refuse to tolerate more than a certain degree of loss of their wages, dignity or autonomy. They strongly believe that they deserve to be treated with human dignity, and that they must act to regain what is theirs: their wages earned through hard physical and emotional work. There are many reasons why workers do or do not stand up for themselves which ultimately depend on whether they feel they must fit into the existing socio-political lines drawn for them, or whether they feel they can and must cross those lines.

The challenge for those who are mistreated and oppressed is to be able to move beyond their relationship with their oppressors and the incidents of oppression. As highly relational beings, the logical tendency is for people to place the blame on their interpersonal relations and to focus on improving a relationship by pleasing the person in authority. A further step in understanding, which can result from grouptalk, is when individual workers come to the point at which they can imagine their worker-employer power relations being reproduced in innumerable similar situations, and being one of many who suffer comparable injustices. Nonetheless, even recognizing this, many women feel defeated, as Song for example, who endured mistreatment from her husband, and said that all the other village women also suffered as she did. However, at least when workers share their success in negotiating and if necessary confronting their employers, a vision of an alternative outcome is created for those who do not think they have the space or capacity to act similarly.

To conclude, my findings point out that in order for silenced domestic workers to be more like their colleagues who advocate for themselves, they need to experience a shift in perspectives about themselves, power relations and relational morality. Equally difficult is the needed shift when subordinated from a service-oriented mindset to one of

self-preservation and personal power, an abrupt shift from playing the subordinate role of a maid who seeks to fulfill her employer's requests to asserting herself. Stories of other workers' successes can be used to convince workers that it is possible to claim power within their labor relations simply by giving voice. When they are first successful in being proactive players in their power relations, a precedent is created which makes it more likely that they will advocate for themselves again when a similar situation arises. In order to be able to make these shifts more easily, workers would need to enter the workplace with at least a partially rights-focused mindset. Instead of reactively seeking to please difficult employers or quitting in silence, workers can decide to comply with employer demands but then proactively look out for their own interests by communicating when difficult situations arise. Workers who come to consciousness through their own experiences can support others' socio-political consciousness through grouptalk. Inspired by workers like Cai and Xiang, who stand up for themselves, Chinese domestic workers can conceivably turn their language of experienced injustice from one of oppression heard only through private transcripts, to one of justice, resistance, and possibility. The first transformative step for each worker will come when she recognizes that she need no longer remain silent.

APPENDIX I

LIST OF INFORMANTS

The following table lists the informants mentioned by name in the dissertation. All names have been changed. In this table, I further distinguish between hourly and monthly work, although in both cases the workers do not live in their employers' households.

	Age	Origin	Domestic Work	Education	Marital Status and Number of Children	Years in Beijing at the time of Interview
Cai	43	Hunan	Hourly	Elementary School	Married, 2	3-4
Cheng Tao	41	Henan	Live-in	High school (dropped out)	Married, 2	6
Feng Zhilian	37	Gansu	Live-in	Illiterate	Married, 2	4-5
Han	30	Jiangxi	Hourly	Elementary School, 5 th grade	Married, 1	7-8
Hui Feng	35	Hebei	Hourly	Middle school	Married, 2	3
Lang	39	Anhui	Mostly live-in, now hourly	Elementary school	Married, 2	20
Lian Jian	52	Hebei	3 years hourly	Elementary school	Divorced twice, 2	4.5
Lin	35	Sichuan	Hourly	Elementary school	Married, 2	12

	Age	Origin	Domestic Work	Education	Marital Status and Number of Children	Years in Beijing at the time of Interview
Lin Juan	39	Heilongjiang	1 year hourly and monthly	Middle school	Married, 1	2
Lin Xia	42	Sichuan	Live-in	High school	Married, 2	5
Luo	38	Hebei	1 year live-in	Finished 5 th year	Married, 2	1
Ming	57	Anhui	Live-in and hourly	Middle school	Married, 1	7
Qiu	44	Henan	4.5 years hourly, now also monthly	Middle school	Married, 3	13
Qing Yi	32	Gansu	6 years live-in, some hourly	Almost finished 5 th grade	Married, 1	6
Rang Hong	30	Shandong	8.5 years live-in	No education, but can read	Married, 1	10
Song	37	Gansu	6 years live-in	Illiterate	Married, 2	6
Song Xiaoshan	31	Anhui	Monthly	Middle school	Married, 2	3
Su	28	Henan	5 years, live-in	Elementary school,	Married, 2	6-7
Tang Jia	27	Henan	4-5 years live-in	Middle school, 2 nd year	Married, 2	4-5
Tang Ming	41	Xinjiang	6 years, hourly	High school	Divorced, 2	9
Tao Lin	45	Shandong	2 years live-in	Middle school, 3 rd year	Divorced, 2	2

	Age	Origin	Domestic Work	Education	Marital Status and Number of Children	Years in Beijing at the time of Interview
Wang Hui	----	Anhui	6 years, half-day, and hired by month	Illiterate	Married, 2	14-15
Wu Xixi	55	Guizhou	2 hourly worker jobs	Illiterate	Married, 1	25-27
Xiang	47	Hebei	3 years hourly	Middle school	Married, 2	3
Xiao	18	Gansu	3 years live-in	2 years of schooling	Single	5
Yan	40	Jilin	2 years live-in and hourly	3 rd year High school	Married, 1	2
Yi Ding	43	Anhui	6 years hourly	Elementary school	Married, 1	6
Zhang Hong	49	Heilongjiang	3 years hourly	9 years of schooling	Married, 1	3
Zhang Shufen	53	Heilongjiang	Live-in, hourly, also 2 years in Guangzhou	High school	Widowed	----
Zhao An	47	Hebei	Over 6 months live-in and hourly	Middle school, 3 rd year	Married, 2	1
Zhen	35	Shanxi	Hourly, monthly, and cleans for companies	High school	Married, 2	6-7
Zhou Cao	41	Hebei	1 year hourly and monthly	Middle school	Married, 2	1

GLOSSARY

<i>ayi</i>	阿姨	maid, domestic worker
<i>baomu</i>	保姆	maid, domestic worker
<i>baoyue</i>	包月	hired by the month
<i>chiku</i>	吃苦	bear hardship
<i>chikui</i>	吃亏	suffer loss
<i>cihou</i>	伺候	wait upon, serve
<i>couhe</i>	凑合	make do
<i>dagongmei</i>	打工妹	“working sister,” migrant woman worker
<i>fengjian</i>	封建	feudal, backward
<i>ganqing</i>	感情	feeling, sentiment
<i>guangrong</i>	光荣	glorious
<i>guanxi</i>	关系	relationship
<i>hugong/huli</i>	护工/护理	carer/nurse in hospital
<i>hukou</i>	户口	residential registration permit
<i>Jiazhenggong Xingdong Yanjiu Xiangmu</i>	家政工行动研究项目	The Action Research Project on Domestic Workers
<i>jianbing</i>	煎饼	pancake snack
<i>jieceng</i>	阶层	social stratum
<i>jieji</i>	阶级	class
<i>kan bieren lianse</i>	看别人脸色	to watch others’ facial expressions
<i>ku</i>	苦	bitter

<i>kuanrong</i>	宽容	tolerant
<i>laoshi</i>	老实	honest and simple
<i>nainai</i>	奶奶	paternal grandmother
<i>nongmingong</i>	农民工	peasant-workers
<i>putong</i>	普通	ordinary, common
<i>ren/renshou</i>	忍/忍受	endure, bear
<i>sancong side</i>	三从四德	the three subjugations and four virtues
<i>shuohua</i>	说话	to speak
<i>sixiang gongzuo</i>	思想工作	ideological work
<i>suzhi</i>	素质	(human) quality
<i>tiefan wan</i>	铁饭碗	(iron rice bowl) a secure job
<i>xiadeng ren</i>	下等人	lower class
<i>xianqi liangmu</i>	贤妻良母	dutiful wife and loving mother
<i>xiaoshigong</i>	小时工	hourly worker
<i>yeye</i>	爷爷	paternal grandfather
<i>yongren</i>	用人	servant
<i>yuesao</i>	月嫂	midwife, post-natal nurse
<i>zhongnan qingnǚ</i>	重男轻女	privileging or care for males, and neglect of females
<i>ziyou</i>	自由	free
<i>zuoren</i>	做人	how to conduct oneself, to be an upright person

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